# HORRORSTORY

*edited by* Karl Edward Wagner



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# THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES



## . . . Beside the Seaside, Beside the Sea . . .

#### Simon Clark

Simon Clark was born on April 20, 1958 in Wakefield, West York-shire—the alleged birthplace of Robin Hood—and currently lives with his wife and son in the South Yorkshire village of Adwick-le-street. A new-comer to this genre, Clark has had stories published in small-press magazines and has written an account of the life and work of the Welsh fantasist, Arthur Machen. In 1984-85 BBC Local Radio broadcast a series of Clark's weird tales together with a radio play which he wrote, created the sound effects for, and acted all the parts. Recently he has completed a script for a half-hour pilot film entitled The Drowned Man for a small production company; shooting was on the east coast of England this past summer. Clark's fascination with deep waters and whatever might inhabit them perhaps stems from his having almost drowned on three occasions. When he is not writing, and can muster enough courage, Clark likes to go skin-diving.

Note on Yorkshire dialect: "The" is usually silent in speech. In print it is usually represented as "t" but this is unsatisfactory. The rhythm and many words of Yorkshire dialect come from the invading Vikings who settled in northern England.

THREE-FIFTHS of the Earth's surface is covered by ocean. From sand beach shallows to icy depths where a layer of salt water seven miles thick covers submerged mountain ranges, valleys, and the rusting hulks of sea-choked ships. The sea: The salt-water womb of life. Yet, an alien world of kelp jungles, silver-sided fish, stony-shelled mollusks and boiling, steamwinded whales.

Temperatures vary from a blood-warm surface in equatorial regions to the ice-thick waters of the arctic and antarctic. The two trade streams of water. Invisible rivers of warm penetrate the cold. And icy fingers push deeply into the body of warmer seas. Along these currents drift the

careless aquatic passengers of the oceans: Jellyfish, weed, kelp, seed pods, the flotsam and jetsam—the living and the dead.

In sweep the currents, with their bobbing free-riders, eventually reaching some coast to deliver their cargoes in the curling foam of surf.

The coastal town hung over the beach, almost lapping the water's edge. It presented a façade of brightly colored lights, pulsing their lotus eater's message into the evening. Crowds drifted along the promenade, occasionally caught in the eddies of smoke-filled bingo halls or drawn by the lure of an arcade, packed with whistling, banging, singing video games.

Pub doors rattled open. Yawning wide like thirsty mouths to admit a flood of bodies through dry throats; filling empty glass and disco-glittered bellies. The first record of the evening belched through the freshly beer-stained air and out into the dusk.

Where the land meets the sea, in the scummy wet divide of ocean and dry sand, the tide unloads its deep-sea cargo and retreats from the resort's pleasure machine, sliding back in a rattle of pebbles. And by the sea-bitten wood breakwater, the pallbearer of the ocean collects and abandons its dead: Wet strands of brown leathery kelp, cracked shells, starfish, an oil-matted cormorant, the screw-shredded remains of a dolphin, the severed head of a conger eel and the scattered fragments of ten million corpses.

"I can't," said the girl, gazing out to where a darkening sky was fusing with a darkening sea. She sighed. "Not all night."

The boy wrapped an arm about her waist. "Why not? You're not back at school till next Monday."

Her voice was soft. "I know . . . But you know?"

He pulled her close. "There's only me in the caravan till Thursday. Come on . . . And we'll go to the Cavern Disco by the harbor, tonight."

The girl stretched; a decision made. "I don't know. I'd like to." And she began to walk toward the lifeboat slipway. Excited, he sensed her resolution. "Me dad left half a bottle of whisky in the caravan. We'll 'ave that. He won't mind . . . Want a cig?"

As they faded into uncertain silhouettes against the colored lights of the town, something stirred at the water's edge. It quivered and trembled like a stranded fish, gulping the briny air. Wide blank eyes blinked, watered, and then watched. The cars and buses stopped and started along the sea front. Some scooters crackled by. Although unseen, it sensed the great presence of the castle ruins perched on the solid mass of rock which dominated the town.

With waves washing her feet, she rose and wavered as if unsure of her

balance. Then the girl, her feet wetly patting the sand, walked up the beach toward the town. The promenade was busy—people sniffing out inviting pubs, clubs, and theaters. The machines still sang their electric songs but the candy floss stalls, sweetshops and children's amusements had closed for the night. Fish and chip papers scurried across the road, occasionally folding about her ankles. She paused by the red shell of a wartime mine, now meekly collecting pennies for a good cause.

Baring his teeth, the man with the camera and scrabbling fur ball of a monkey approached her—"Hello, luv. Lovely evening"—and threw the monkey at her. Screaming, it kicked, bouncing back onto the man's arm.

Tiny black fingers clutched at his lapels and tie.

"Petro! Petro. Go to the nice girl, Petro." The monkey squeaked. "Have your picture taken with Petro, luv. Now move that hair away, we can't see yer face. Petro, go to the nice lady." The monkey clung to him crying. Camera in one hand, he pried the limpet capuchin from him with the other. "It's OK luv. He wouldn't 'arm a—bloody hell! The sod bit me."

The monkey scrambled up onto his shoulders and the man sucked his bloody finger, hissing threats. When he looked up, the girl had gone. Three giggling girls, pink-flushed with martini, were crossing the road. "Hello, my darlings. Lovely evening." He threw the monkey at them. It obligingly cuddled into the scented arms of the redhead.

By shellfish stalls, selling cold bite-size morsels of salted gristle and muscle. Hamburger, hot-dog stalls expelling hot breaths of sausage, onion, and frying smells. More arcades. And as the money bells rang, colored lights flashed in gratitude.

The night wind was blowing cold. Flying in from the dark distances of the sea; sizzling the surf and driving the tattered paper flotsam before it. Some fastened jackets and coats. But most fell back before the chilling breeze to seek refuge in pubs and cafes.

A handful, beerfull and numb, defied the cold ruffling wind and pointed out to sea where a ship was sinking. Or, perhaps, it was the street lights on the far side of the bay. Or they pointed at girls as skirts lifted in the goose-fleshing updraft of air.

A wolf whistle. "Want a cig, luv?"

Another voice. "'Ave a drink of me ale."

"Dunt. He's peed in it!"

One laughed. "He's shy. He really means, will you go to bed with him?" A voice cut across the babble: "Shut up, Mick! Leave t'poor lass alone. It's all right luv, don't take any notice. They're 'alf cut."

Outside the pub, she paused. A door opened and someone hurried by, dragging some of the odors and the warmth of the public bar with them.

Inside. Black crossbeams segregated the yellow-white walls and ceiling which was hung with polished brass. A beer-colored, cigarette-burn-patterned carpet was beginning to fray. Blue coils of tobacco smoke twisted about the room, occasionally vibrating to the throb of the juke box in the next room. She slipped through the bar, her eyes absorbing the rows of bottles holding amber promises. A tap jetted foaming lager, and the barman's gold-ringed fingers and fingernails clicked against the glass. She sat at a vacant table. Two dozen voices, like waves, washed over her. Submerging her beneath the bubble and hiss of words:

"Another pint of mild, Jack?"

A woman's voice soared into laughter. "You dirty beggar, Harry! He'll get 'imself shot."

Voices fused and dissolved. "I think it's a bit of sunburn. It is. We 'ad a good two hours in the park, this afternoon. I wonder if a bit of cream. You know, Nivea'll bring it out. You should've seen our Janet last year, when she got back from France. Her legs were burnt shocking. Just 'ere below her knees, covered with blisters. Like balloons filled with water."

A match flared in the smoke-soaked air, and wet lips suckled the stem of a pipe. "Did I tell you," said the man, "about that bloke. He lives in the same town as us? Well, one day, when he was at work, local vet phoned him, yer see, and told him to go see him straight way. And on no account go home first. So, this bloke, wondering what's up, goes to vet's and sees he's got his dog—a bloody great alstation. 'What yer doing with me dog?' he asks. Vet tells him a neighbor saw the dog choking in the garden so he took dog to the vet. And vet got some tweezers and pulled out of dog's throat three finger—human fingers. They were stuck, choking the dog. So this bloke phones police and tells them to go to his house. Anyway, when they get there, they find back door open. They searched house and found a man in the bedroom wardrobe. It was a burgular. He'd broken in. Not known there was a dog till it went for him. Only way he could get away was to hide in the wardrobe. But bloody dog got 'old of 'is 'and first, and 'ad three of his fingers."

A crash—splintering glass—jolted the bar silent. "That's one way o' getting art o' washing up," observed the man, his dry smile exposing the yellow chips of his teeth.

"Oh, you and your lip, Freddy. Another quip like that and you're barred, love," retorted the barman, as he kicked the pieces into a corner.

Another voice, lyrical with alcohol, was raised. "A few months ago . . . five or six or so, I heard about someone, who lives near us. His wife bought this big piece of steak. Like that. Big as a plate. Anyway, she cuts it in half. Puts one piece in the fridge and 'as t'other for her dinner. Later

that day she's feeling off it. Poorly. So she tells her husband to get the steak and cook it for 'is supper. He goes to fridge. Opens it. And the meat. This piece of bloody steak fills plate again. It's hanging over the side. And when he looked at it. He saw it was just . . . just moving, like shivering. They took it to the Council offices, and they found it was cancer. Cancer in the meat. And they found where it's touched some sausages, it had like infected them and they were bursting out, splitting their skins. Just think of that. That poor woman'd eaten the meat. And it was just a piece of cancer . . . living cancer."

The night was cold and still when she left the pub. A few people still walked along the promenade. But they hardly strolled; there was purpose and direction in their stride.

In the distance the saline hiss of the men was subdued. Above, the sky was clearing and the light disc of the moon duplicated itself in darkened shop windows. To her left, stone steps ascended into the darkness. And twelve steps up, sat a lad, his face as white as lard. He squirted something from a yellow tube into a polystyrene cup. Then, cupping his hands around it, as if warming them, he raised the cup and rested it against his top lip. He breathed deeply—drawing great lungfuls of cold air and fumes into his chest, which burnt his nose and throat, filling his lungs with fire. A fire that flooded through his body to numb his arms and legs and his soul. Then he dropped back onto his elbows as the solvent fire dissolved his brain.

Somebody coughed and spat. "What a chip, luv?" Two men carrying bouquets of greasy newspaper stood by her side.

"Yer can do better than that, Shillies. 'Ave a bit of his fish. Best bit of cod in Scabs." The gleaming white fragment of fish was clutched in his oil-glossed fingers. "She looks foreign to me. Look . . . She can't understand a word yer say."

The other tapped his head knowingly. "No, I think she's a bit . . . in the head. Even so, she doesn't look bad."

A soft laugh padded into the night. "God knows. Yer can't see her face for all that 'air."

The other's voice dropped to a whisper: "Do you look at the mantelpiece when yer poking the fire?" Throwing away the screwed-up newspapers, they each took an arm and led her up a darkly winding side street. Packed with cars, it was silent. Black windows of houses, like blind eyes, stared hard against the night.

"Here'll do. It's the back yard of that old chippie. No one'll see us." Into the high-walled yard they guided her. Then drew her toward a bed-sized patch of balding grass. "It's my turn first this time, Shillies." Shillies relinquished his hold on her and moved out of sight behind a shed of sagging boards.

The other pulled her close and her long arms wrapped about him like the white rubber tentacles of an octopus. She opened her mouth as he bent toward her. The silver-gray of her tongue moved, and her teeth were a tightly packed row of blue-black mussels set in white flesh. The shells opened. Mother of pearl flowers. Hypnotized. His lips met her water-cold flesh. Salt pricked his tongue. And the rush and hiss of the sea was in his ears. Bitingly cold brine flushed through him, cascading into his lungs. His mouth jerked open and then was as still and as silent as his cold, dead heart.

Shillies started when she appeared at his side. Softly, he called his friend's name. His voice failed. She was turning her face to his. A strange flat immobile face; the face of a . . . No. No. It was the face of a girl. Her fingers. No, the wet sucker tentacles of a squid, touched his lips—and pressed. He could not resist at they pushed into his mouth, probing his tongue. His mouth yawned wider and wider as the chill hand, then wrist, slipped into his mouth. And smoothly slid into his throat. No air reached his lungs as the arm, as long as death, continued its tight slide through the core of his body. Eternally, working its way along the winding path of his stomach. He could still feel its cold unceasing passage through his saltwater being as he lay face down in a sea of newspaper balls, chip trays, wooden forks and crushed Coca-Cola cans.

Where the land meets the sea. The milk surf rolled up the beach toward the town. And waves moved across a crackling band of pebbles to swirl and bubble about her feet. Then, calmly, she stepped forward into the roaring darkness of the nighttime ocean.

Three-fifths of the world's surface is covered by water. Should the polar ice caps melt, then the sea level would rise dramatically, flooding many hundreds of square miles of dry land.

Where the sea meets the shore. The ocean surged up the beach, rushing, tumbling, cascading, falling, rising toward the dry land.

The tide had turned.

# Mother's Day

### Stephen F. Wilcox

Stephen F. Wilcox writes: "I was born February 5, 1951, right here in Rochester where, except for two years spent in the army, I've lived my entire life. I have a B.A. in journalism and formerly worked as a reporter for one of our local dailies before striking out on my own as a freelance writer. My creative writing efforts are directed toward mystery/suspense stories. I've written two mystery novels, as yet unsold, and have several short stories coming up in Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine. The first will appear in the March issue, the second in April or May. Other pieces are as yet unschedule."

If "Mother's Day" is a fair example of what Wilcox can do, other editors had better start taking a look at their schedules.

The Two-story frame house on Madigan Street was fast going to seed. The paint on the old wood clapboards—a diluted yellowish gold seemingly exclusive to aged city houses—had blistered and alligatored from myriad seasons of sun and rain and snow. Not that the rest of the street was in any better shape; an empty wine bottle lay in the storm gutter, a gaggle of candy wrappers rode down the sidewalk on a stiff winter breeze, a rusty Oldsmobile sat perched on cinder blocks in a yard three doors down.

Donald took it all in as he pulled his late-model Chevrolet into the driveway and switched off the ignition. He didn't enjoy coming back to the old neighborhood. Changes came too quickly, often too violently here, and made him feel much older than his thirty-two years. And there was the memory of Father. It dominated the place like an open wound that refused to heal.

But Donald came, because he had to come. It was Saturday afternoon, and Saturday afternoons, nearly every one he could remember, belonged to Mother.

"Lucky Ellen. Smart Ellen," he muttered as he lifted the bulky toolbox from the trunk of his car. Big sister Ellen had married an airline executive and moved out to Chicago a dozen years before, effectively creating an eight-hundred-mile buffer zone breached only once a year at Christmas.

The steps groaned as Donald climbed to the front porch and crossed to the door, the toolbox swinging at his side. Briefly he inspected the new storm door he had installed the Saturday before and laughed mirthlessly at the red and black sign mother had since affixed to its upper pane. No Solicitors. He knocked on the inner door using the code Mother insisted on—shave-and-a-haircut, two bits—and let himself in with his key.

"It's me, Mother. Don't panic," he called out dryly.

"Donnie Bear? Is that you? Come see me."

Donald set the toolbox in the foyer and walked into the living room, taking care not to upset the china cat that rested in the doorway. The room was a study in kitsch; a worn but still serviceable oriental rug, a Victorian sofa incongruously flanked by two striped platform rockers, a wicker basket brimming with skeins of virulently colored yarns, and everywhere ceramic figurines. Cherubs dancing on the windowsills, the Virgin Mother staring down from atop the television set, rearing horses and towheaded little boys and a heroic bust of JFK on the bookshelf. And the big china cat by the doorway.

"I'm in here, Donnie Bear. I haven't been feeling very well the last few days."

He opened the sliding door leading to what had always been the dining room but now served as Mother's bedroom. It was better this way, she insisted, what with her bad hip and the trouble she has climbing stairs and the high cost of heating the whole house these days. The summer before, at Mother's urging, Donald had rehung the door at the top of the stairs and shut down the heating vents to the second floor. The man who bought the heavy oak dining table and hutch had helped him move Mother's bedroom furnishings downstairs.

"Is it the arthritis again, Mother?" Donald asked with all the sincerity he could muster.

She was sitting up in the bed, a checked afghan spread across her lap. "I suppose so. Whatever, it pains me something awful. Just getting old, I guess."

"Nonsense. You'll never get old." But she already has, Donald thought, taking in the crow's feet and denture lines and the scrawny slackness in the skin of her neck and arms.

"Your father would have been sixty-seven last week," she said softly but emphatically.

Donald pretended not to hear. "Angela sends her love."

"I'm sure," Mother sniffed. "Did she sent along a temperance lecture, too?"

"She's not like that, really. It's just that, well, with her own family and

the problems they've had with alcohol, she doesn't like to see—"

"Oh, and now I'm an alkie, I suppose? Because I have a little brandy in my tea? She doesn't care that it helps ease my pain a little. Makes me feel like a criminal when I visit you."

Donald sighed. "It's because she cares about your health that she doesn't like to see you . . . overdoing it."

"Well, I don't want to argue about it," Mother said, changing moods.

"How's Little Bill? Does he sent his grandma a big kiss?"

"Billy is fine," Donald nodded. He resented it when Mother called his three-year-old son Little Bill. It had been Angela's idea to name the boy William, after Donald's father, and Donald had agreed. But Mother's pointed referrals to "Little Bill" were too much.

Big Bill Heidler, everyone had called his father. A man's man. An outdoorsman of consummate skill and enthusiasm, he bought Donald his first fishing rod when he was only Billy's age and presented him with a .22 rifle of his own on his tenth birthday. Every kid on the block envied Donald that day. Big Bill Heidler. "My boy just may be the best shot in the state someday, you wait and see," Big Bill bragged proudly to his hunting buddies the day Donald shot his first rabbit. But that was long ago, before the accident.

"You planning to finish the house today?" Mother asked.

"Yes. I brought my tools. Actually, I did most of the work last week. All I have left to do is the front door and the living room windows."

"That's good. These fuel bills I've been getting are horrible and we're not even into the worst part of the winter yet." Mother coughed, a dry, affected hacking to emphasize her next remark. "I've been keeping the thermostat way down, like you told me, Donnie, but I don't know. Seems like I'm always cold these days."

"Well, you'll be able to turn up the heat a little once I'm through weatherizing the rest of the place."

"I'd better be. It's not fit to live in, hardly, like this."

"You made the decision to stay here, Mother. We offered to take you in at our place. We could have sold this old house and used the money to build you your own studio apartment off the back of our house."

"Hmmmph. Take me in, all right, like you take in somebody's dirty laundry." She shook her head. "Angela doesn't really want me there anyway."

"That's not true," Donald said. In fact, it was Angela who first suggested the idea to Donald. But Mother didn't know that and wouldn't have believed it had he told her. Angela had married her boy and taken him away from his home, his duties, and Mother would never forget that.

"What would I do way out there?" she asked rhetorically. "The bus line doesn't even go out that far. How would I get to the downtown

stores? I'd never see my friends."

"It's only fifteen miles by freeway, Mother," Donald said, exasperation beginning to seep through the calm of his voice. "I've told you before, Angela would take you shopping at the mall near our subdivision. And I could drive you into the city when you wanted to visit with your lady friends." But not every blessed Saturday afternoon, Donald thought.

"It wouldn't be the same." Mother kneaded the edges of the afghan with her spindly fingers, refusing to look up at her son. "This is our home, always. Your father practically rebuilt this place all by himself, in his spare time, when he wasn't out making a good life for us all. He'd never forgive me if I let you move me out of here. He'd roll over in his grave."

There was the specter of Father again, and this time Donald couldn't ignore it. The pain ran too deep; the memories cried too loud. "It wasn't my fault," he said plaintively.

Mother waited a second too long before answering. "I know that. You couldn't help it. I've always known that."

He'd been sixteen years old; half his life ago. November. The early morning had provided a light dusting of snow, as if to aid them in the hunt. He remembered a pewter sky and the sharp cold air, like a knife in his lungs. There was a clearing in the woods, a gently sloping hillock, and beyond that a copse of young birch trees tangled up with wild ivy. Father had circled and gone ahead to flush the buck. Now there came a rustling in the birch grove and a slight movement as the brush parted ahead of Donald. He raised the 12 gauge to his shoulder, a deer slug ready in the chamber. Another movement in the trees. He hesitated a lifetime, and then fired.

"It wasn't my fault," Donald muttered to himself, as he yanked the caulking gun from his toolbox and inserted a tube of elastic sealant. Using a utility knife to cut the tip off the tube, he watched the white goo ooze slowly up the nozzle and he set to work plugging the gaps around the aluminum storm windows.

The house had been quiet for the last two hours while Donald labored to complete the weatherization project. Mother stayed in her converted bedroom, browsing aimlessly through one of the many mail order

catalogues she kept under the bed. She never disturbed Donald when he was taking care of her house. The job moved along at a satisfactory pace; the duty was light this day. Still, Donald couldn't keep his mind on what his hands were doing. The memories wouldn't let him.

It was always like that when he came to the house. He would walk up the front steps and remember when Father had built them to replace the crumbling cement steps that had been there before. He could see the corded muscles in Father's shoulders when he swung the sledge, breaking down the old steps into defeated bits of concrete. He would come into the fover and see the closet Father had built in the corner and the ten-point antlers, Father's prize kill, mounted above the kitchen door. He would go down to the basement to change a fuse and stumble across the steamer trunk full of battered bowling trophies Father had won and the stacks of yellowed outdoors magazines Father had collected.

Everywhere he looked, Donald saw Big Bill Heidler, the man's man. and himself, a terrified sixteen-year-old boy all alone on a November morning in the woods.

A tragic accident, the minister had said. Instantaneous death due to a gunshot wound in the chest, the coroner had ruled, and the authorities had closed the book on it. At least he didn't suffer, said those who only wanted to be kind. But Donald had suffered, and suffered still with every reminder. He saw Ellen and remembered the accusatory tears. He saw the old neighborhood and remembered the long lines at the funeral parlor. He saw this house and remembered it all. And so did Mother.

"Donnie Bear, how's it going out there?" she called to him from her bed.

"Fine," Donald answered. "I'm just about done."

"I was thinking I might like some tea," she said. "Wouldn't a nice hot cup of tea be good?

"Sounds great," Donald called out, as he finished caulking the last gap on the last of the living room's three windows. "You take it easy, Mother, and I'll put the water on to boil."

Putting away the caulking gun, he carried his toolbox with him as he passed through the fover to the kitchen. The tea kettle sat in its usual place atop the massive forty-inch range, the very one Father bought years ago when Donald was seven or eight. He remembered trying to help as Father and the man from the appliance store carried the great white monster into the kitchen, and Father telling him he was too small and that he should just stay out of the way.

Now the big range was old and less formidable somehow; the porcelain enamel was chipped in spots and worn off completely on the rounded corners. Donald carried the kettle to the sink, filled it halfway with fresh tap water and replaced it on the left front burner. Taking a long wooden match from the box on the counter, he lighted the gas burner and watched, mesmerized, as the blue-orange flame licked the kettle's underside.

A huge roaring bonfire out at the landfill site, a senior class tradition at the old high school. Laughter and taunts as his classmates drank beer from cans and danced wildly around the pyre. Graduation in a week and, when summer ended, off to college at exotic-sounding places like Chapel Hill and Palo Alto. But not for Donald. He would stay home. Mother was all alone now, and she needed him. There would be his old room and menial jobs in restaurants and shoe stores. He would take, but fail, the entrance exam for the police academy. Then the eight long years of night school at City College and the desk job with the area's largest manufacturing firm. Marriage to Angela, the new split level in the suburbs, a family of his own. But always there were the Saturday afternoons at Mother's.

"Here we are, all hot and delicious," Donald announced as he placed the tray on the bedside table and handed Mother her cup of tea. Without comment, she reached below the table and brought up a nearly depleted bottle of blackberry brandy. Donald pretended not to notice when she poured a liberal portion of the elixir into the cup. He recognized the mildly glazed, mildly petulant look in her eyes and he knew what to expect. First she would be combative, then sweet and conciliatory; finally she would sleep, convincing herself when she awoke the next morning that it was the arthritis and assorted other ills—some real, most imagined—that had sapped her strength.

"So you're all done with the weatherization?" she asked, sipping the

tea.

Donald smiled, "All finished."

"Took long enough. Two whole afternoons." She squinted up at him. "Your father was a lot handier than you. He'd have done it all in one day and had time to go fishing."

Donald set down his teacup and, struggling to stay calm, said, "Father

was good at some things, I'm good at others."

"Your father was a good policeman, too," Mother grumbled. "Everyone in the neighborhood respected Big Bill Heidler. You could have been a decent policeman yourself, if you'd tried. It's what your father wanted, you know."

"I like being a cost analyst, Mother, believe it or not. I'm good at it. Besides, I took the police exam and failed."

"Hmmmph. On purpose, you failed, I know that."

"Believe what you want, Mother. I'm not going to argue with you." Donald stood up. "Anyway, I have to go. Angela and I are going out to dinner with another couple tonight and I have to get home and shower." He gulped down the rest of the tea and turned toward the kitchen door.

To his back, Mother cried. "You'll be back next Saturday, won't you,

Donnie Bear? You won't forget?"

"Do I ever forget, Mother? Do you ever let me forget?"

She let the remark pass. "Will I be able to turn up the thermostat a bit now, dear?"

"Yes, Mother. The house is as airtight as I can possibly make it. You should see a difference."

"I appreciate your volunteering to do the job, Donnie, I really do." She was beginning to tire.

Donald returned to the side of the bed and kissed her cheek. "I was glad to do it, Mother. Now, you get some rest. I'll just put the dishes in the sink and let myself out the back."

"You're really a good son, Donnie," she sighed. "Your father would be proud."

Proud? Donald thought as he carried the tray into the kitchen and stacked the dirty cups in the sink. When had Father ever been proud of me. Mother? When was he even satisfied? Eat all your vegetables, Donnie, so you can grow up to be a big strong cop like me. Go out for the football team, son, it'll make a man out of you. Do what I say, be what I am, like what I like. My house, my rules. Get a haircut. Throw away those dirty jeans. Turn down that rotten music. Forget college. Learn to be a man. Caress that rifle. Donnie, and shoot to kill.

It was November again and he was in the clearing. The cold air, the light snowfall, the copse of birch trees ahead. There was the movement in the brush and, as he raised his gun and caressed it with his shoulder, a glimpse of red and black. Then the second movement in the trees. He could see the target clearly now. He hesitated a lifetime as Father turned toward him and raised his arms, anger and fear distorting Big Bill's face. Donald smiled, satisfied, and pulled the trigger.

"It wasn't my fault," he whispered, bending down to pick up the toolbox. "It was fate, pure and simple. Father was meant to die, at that chosen time, in that chosen place. It was just his day." Then, just before

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going out the back door to his waiting car and his waiting home and family, Donald reached over to the old forty-inch range and turned on the gas for the left front burner.

"And today," he smiled, as he went out the door, "is Mother's day."

## Lava Tears

## Vincent McHardy

Born April 26, 1955, Canadian writer Vincent McHardy currently lives in Agincourt, Ontario. Those long, cold winters seem to have made for a voracious reading appetite as well as a hot hand at the typewriter. In the last few years McHardy has written a great many short stories, quickly graduating from the amateur press to Night Cry, Borderland, Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine, and various anthologies. Recently he has had the honor of having a story sold to J. N. Williamson's anthology, Cold Sweats, rejected by the publisher. McHardy has completed his first novel, Id Flesh (his agent's title), and is at work on a second, Going Down the Drain. Branching out, another current project is a script, Dream Castles, written for a course given by Phil Hersh—which McHardy also may rework as a novel.

Vincent McHardy has appeared in each of the last three volumes of The Year's Best Horror Stories. Here's a writer to watch.

SILENT AND OVERNIGHT it grew towering and single-minded.

Like I asked. Without warning or tremor. Cracking up under the old Tee-Pee Drive Inn, facing the town and the sea.

Paricutin took Dionisio Pulido's cornfield.

Pet will take my pain.

It will come in beauty. On a clear, hot, late spring Sunday morning. (The first really hot day since Indian Summer.) I can see them now. Grateful for a day off. Nothing to do but sit and eat. Watching the grass and their asses grow fat. Mr. Horance will be out on his bedroom balcony rubbing his Industrial-Arts-Shop nicked hands over the rail. You loved the view. Loved being at the top of the hill. Loved telling people there was no better line of sight in all of Abbots Gate. Well, when you walk out on the balcony (the one that you built with your "own Goddamned hands") take a look at my work. The kid you once offered to take a patch of sandpaper to, to clean up the rough edges. You've been around blocks of wood too long, Mr. Horance. It's not that easy with people. People

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don't take well to abrasive treatment. All the nicks and rasps of saw-toothed remarks leave stains. Nothing you can hide with a coat of paint.

For you I'll send something special. Out on the balcony, slack jawed and pulling tight your pajama cord, I'll send a little tremor. Nothing big. It won't smash the house. Just big enough to detach your home-fix-it project and you, send you down the hill over the retaining wall and on to the road. Oh you'll roll well. A big beefy guy like you. It won't kill you. You'll hardly be skuffed. No. The vent will getya. You won't be able to stop rolling. It's quite a steep road. Flapping over and down, there, waiting at the bottom, open mouthed, and orange-red smiling earth mouth, quick as you please, popping you in.

Glorious sight! Wondrous full smells! Like a ladybug under a magnifying glass at noon. Lung and intestine gas expanding, popping you like an overinflated circus balloon. Which is just what you are . . . what you were . . . Mr. Horance. All fluff and no guts. Tight and safe in your sausage skin . . . till I banged you into the oven. Sorry you have to leave so soon. The first at the party. The first to fry away. I wish you could stay to see all the fireworks. But that's for me. I'm calling the shots.

Most of the shots. The special shots. The ones dear to my heart. I don't know all the nine thousand people of Abbots Gate. I don't suppose they're any different from the ones I do know. Quick to jump and point and giggle. Not keeping their nose out of other people's business. Much like spinster Gillard. Not someone I'd pick for a neighbor. Old as coal and not nearly as warm. She spends all the friction of her life cleaning. What for and for whom I don't know. No one ever visits her. If she's not inside dusting the bricabrac, shampooing the rugs and searching for silverfish, she's outside instructing the hired help how to cut the lawn and paint the gingerbread board trim. Generally trying to stretch minimum wage work up to professional standards. No detail of mess escapes her. She'd long since cut down all the trees on her property. Fall no longer preyed on her mind. She spit her vinegar on neighbors who neglected to catch their own tree leaves as they fell. The sins of others carried on the wind to land on her lawn. She'd have covered her house in plastic were it not for the cost.

And for all that I wouldn't have minded. If she kept to herself. Played out her own nightmares in the dark. But she needed me. Spread the pain. Sighted me in her cross hairs every time circumstances offered a choice shot.

"It is all a question of hygiene, diet, and moral persuasion," she'd say, "It's all so very clear. I've never seen you washed or with combed hair. Running, playing and weeping sweat demands care! And diet! That

candy bar in your shirt pocket tells me all I need to know . . . And morality! Teenagers today. Do you know the word? I think not. Lord, do you think you invented . . . it?

"It is up to you, Tom. You have only yourself to blame."

A small sermon but one she never tired of repeating, embellishing, thundering down at me. Though I tried to hide whenever I saw you drifting close I could never run clear of your evangelical selfrighteousness. Like a vengeful Nuee ardent, a tumbling, superheated multi-legged, glowing cloud covering all before it.

So... for you dust. A blizzard of gray-pink corruption. Choking down your chimney and seeping through windows and key holes. Dust will plop on your starched white linen bed sheets, cloak your sitting room, and crust your Daulton figurines into lumps. Windows will plague over. And those delicate Spanish lace curtains will change into pillars of clay.

You'll spend a frenzied last minute. What to clean first before you fill up and gag-stop?

There's a question. What will you do? Nothing important. You never did anything important in the thousands of minutes gone by; why change at the end? When your numbing nothings are collected together you'll die alone, forgotten. This way with me you'll die for a reason. All of you together, bowing at the coronation of a king. Bright baubles for my crown. The day will dawn a new Christmas lighting the world I control.

A Christmas Clarence and his crowned teeth won't be around to laugh at. Clarence, who liked to call himself the town's second ugliest boy after me. Well, he wasn't so unhappy about being the second ugliest. He was happier that I was the first.

"I'll get these off someday," he'd say, tapping at his grill work mouth of braces. "I'll have a straight smile. I'll be human. But you'll never change."

Clarence! You look like an apple stuck on a stick. Removing the braces won't change you into a swimwear model. Relieved of your metal armor you'll be forced to cringe from your second worse feature. What to choose, your wide-spaced slightly off-center eyes, your curved spine, or your bootlike ears? Picky. Picky. Picky. Number two on your Deformity Hit Chart clearly will be a sell out.

If those braces bother you so much I'll remove them. I'll open a new world for you. My secondary court jesters will come calling. Lightning will serve you. St. Elmo's fire will dance and play your teeth. The electrical wind will heat and wash those braces away. Why worry about crooked teeth when you have a black hole for a face?

To hell with fashion. It was never a love of mine, not even a flirt. But

my Love's love was fashion. Sue would throw up if she ever heard me say that or even think that I thought that we could ever be called lovers. She vomits quite a bit as it is with all those diuretics she takes to keep the weight off. I'm not complaining. I love her trim shape. The body swells just enough to hold her dresses and slips from an embarrassing fall. Fashion on her worked. She spent so much time and money on those clothes. Months would pass without her repeating a costume. Snuggly woolens for winter ice breezes; cottons for summer. So climate threw her off pace. She snapped rain and snow and desert blows into line. She slipped on a breeze of whims. Her hair the crest of fashion—teased, flipped, curled, straight, a ribbon, flowers, henna and a highlight or two. A wondrous panorama of change and reward for the attentive watcher.

And Oh, how I watched.

When she walked to and from school. When she went out on dates. Especially on dates. I always followed. Never seen. In shadows, from laneways and behind shrubs. Even into the hills where she'd go with Frank, Dave and more recently Bill. Even when she was so careful not to be followed, so fearful of being seen and caught . . . I saw. I heard. And after, when they'd leave laughing, I touched the mucus wetness where they'd lain.

For you Sue a whirlwind. A short, surgical puff that will leave you blind, naked, and hairless. The whirlwind could bake you and eat you to the bone. But I want my pretty mannequin to come crawling over matchstick bodies and broken sidewalk slabs. I'll not turn you away. And you won't be able to laugh and turn your nose in disgust when I look at you.

Oh my children. What a toasting it will be! Bodies pushed up against dead-end streets like twigs caught in a sewer grating, hot mud pack for the terminally wrinkled, asphyxiation for the smoker and non-smoker alike.

All this and more.

One I'll save, Hank, the supermarket butcher's helper. Of all the high and low of Abbots Gate I'll keep Hank cool and comfortable while all the rest fry. In the freezer down with the beef sides and plucked chicken you'll keep until later. So you have an IQ of 70 and you lost your job at the stockyards because you molested the death row cows, I don't care. We talked. Or rather I talked and you listened. You didn't talk much. Was it because you were too stupid to jeer? Is that it?

Least you listened. For your silence you'll live. Play with all the bodies you want. After I'm through there will be enough for even your appetite.

We both know what loneliness can do.

Abbots Gate will feel my need. My cresting rhythmic beat. My deep

spasms. My controlled, confident impulse. My . . .

They won't know who. It will be my secret. But they'll feel it. Know it like a slap on the face. My mark will free all your cloth covered places, your blushing birth marks, your freckled stretch marks and ingrown toe nails. Left breast too small, mismatched, not at all? Going to fat? Your gums bleeding plaque? One testicle not distended? I'll see it. No creams or soaps can fool me. Trusses and wrappings and bags over heads will come off. I'll see you ugly to the bone.

And he watched. From the edge of the woods he watched the people stroll through MacGreggor Park. And as he watched, and selected, he chewed at the corners on his fingers. His nails were almost gone. What was left was so reduced it was impossible to find an edge to work from. His hand wound throbbed with a new kind of pain. Not at all like the shameful bathroom picking pain but rather an ethereal exalting freeing pain. These carvings called for hope.

Tom stopped gnawing. His hands tumbled to his side. The moment was here. There was no mistake. No words. His feet led him along the forest edge. Tom walked with a purpose. And he didn't walk alone.

In the half dark, Sam Tullage judged the fallen log to be two feet high. It was three. So when he lifted his leg and spotted his flashlight farther into the woods and stepped . . . he tripped. The ground was as unkind as his fellow searchers' comments.

"I think Big Foot got him," Mike Resnick said from somewhere to the left.

"Undigestible!" Steve responded. "Sam's got a bottle. You've been holding out on us, haven't you?" Brushing aside some spindly ash saplings, Steve saw his prostrate friend.

"You're lucky you won't be carrying me out of here. I could have snapped my leg. Give us a hand."

Mike walked in on the two just as Sam bent down and reached out with his hand.

"Oh, my God! A snake!" Steve cried.

Charged with a vision of his own painful, lingering death, Sam jumped up and bleated, "Kill it!" He then proceeded to tango from one unstable perch to another, finally ending up on the log that had tripped him.

"Well, he can move when he wants to," Steve said. He cradled his shotgun across his arms and steadied his flashlight on Sam.

"Go on. Give the snake a good view," Sam yelled. He looked down to

where his gun had fallen. The ferns and the tangled dead branches of forest floor seemed all to move like worried fingers over a knotty problem. His discarded flashlight underlit the ferns making a beacon where the night insects crawled.

"Come on, Sam. There is no snake." Mike kicked the spot with his Cougars. "Steve's just wasting our time."

"Christ!" Sam scrambled down. "I'm not out here for my health. If I wasn't a volunteer fireman I'd be home in front of the tube."

"Wouldn't we all." Steve looked up through the forest canopy searching for a star. It was black. The only light came from their flashlights. The wind blew. Sending the oak and maple leaves twisting and surging. The pines provided a low background hiss. Blending well with the more boisterous deciduous woodwinds. All creaked under the communal strain.

"Look at it. There's going to be a storm. Let's go back."

"Can't. We promised to work to the beach then north up to Battleman Ridge. Then . . . "

"... over to Wayburn farm," Sam interrupted Mike. "But that's at least fifteen miles. We'll be drowned rats by then." Steve spat.

"Do what you want." Sam pulled out his Scout Masters compass. "Over there is the sea." He motioned. "I can't depend on mad ducks like you to lead us out of here." Snapping back branches and letting them swish back uncontrollably he pressed on.

"You know she's probably hitched out of this dead-end town," Sam said as he dodged a branch. "There's nothing here to keep 'um. I'd run if I were her."

"If you had kids you'd know why we're out here." Mike said.

"I'm careful. Not like you guys who get all excited on a Saturday night. Whoooo-boy! Let's rip some panties."

"Are you sure you don't have any kids?" Sam said.

"Stella's a damned liar. Are you going to take the word of some cheap

"Okay. Calm down. That's not a stick you're waving around." Sam laughed and picked up the pace.

"We're fools out here scaring the frogs and toads." Steve felt reassured on this topic. "I tell ya. That tail hightailed out of here."

"Cheer up, Steve. Call this Community PR. There are only two gas stations in town. If word got out that you backed out of your civic duty

"I'm here! Aren't I? I'm going to catch a cold just like everyone else.

Just because I grump when some horny teen scents an out-of-town pair of jeans . . . "

"Right. It's your town. You love it, wouldn't leave it for the world,"

Mike said.

"Right."

Mike shook his head and smiled at the ground. "How much farther? The air's getting pretty thick back here."

"Close."

The forest had changed as they moved. The trees were thicker, shorter, and closely packed. Whereas before the wind raced high up in the branches, here the wind sped along the ground picking up needles and dirt. Now, added to the mix of wind, branch and leaf sounds, came water. The break of surf gathered tempo and power as they walked. A blue, ever so faint, woolly glow clung to the low shrubs. The sea grumbling grind groans drowned out the tree whispers as the three stumbled onto the beach.

They faced the sea. Flashlight beams skipped out over the water like poorly thrown flat stones drying thirty feet from shore. The Atlantic kicked and bit the beach. The long white lip of surf pouted and unfurled. The water would push up higher before morning.

"Tomorrow I'm beachcombing. No telling what will wash up." Steve looked happy for the first time tonight.

"Squid. Jellyfish. Tin cans," Sam said.

"Viking loot. I've seen the old boat moorings carved in solid granite." Sam let out an exaggerated sigh. "That hustler Arty drilled those holes

to catch ape dumb tourists. Did you ever wonder why those holes just happened to be beside his marina and nowhere else?"

"How the hell do I know what Vikings did?" Caught out again Steve turned his collar up.

"Let's move," Mike said. "They'll be sending out a search party for us if we aren't at Wayburns in an hour."

Steve snorted. Sam laughed to himself. Though it was late and the sky overcast, a faint glow attended their walk. Somewhere above, a moon shone giving just enough radiation to contrast the sea from the sky. But the pines were a mountain. Crowding the beach, backing it into the sea, you felt you could only enter the forest on its terms. For a time they walked in silence. The surf lip curled up on the sand, sucking back, and trailing a senile froth. Eyes on stalks threw back the searchlight probes as crabs picked the scum. The ocean worried the men's nerves. It grumbled like some Titan grinding monstrous marbles in a tired hand. Low and constant, after a while the listener doesn't realize the sound still

pounds. The experience becomes systemic. Indistinguishable from internal gurglings.

A northwesterly picked up, lifting the sea foam and sprinkling the men. Steve pulled his collar tighter. "Damn. It was such a nice day today. Now this."

Mike sniffed the air. "Spring. It's up and down."

Mike sniffed again.

"Fire!" Sam said what Mike thought.

Up ahead the beach curved out to the sea, stopped at a point, then doubled back on the other side. Cooked cedar-pine resins and charcoal carried from behind the tree line from the other invisible beach.

Wet sand fought their running boots. Dancing flashlights turned the landscape into a rush of erratic motion. Stumps and stones jumping into view. Dodging back into shadows. Now, almost at the point, they slowed. Lighted trees barred their way. Red-yellow-orange a bonfire painted their way onto the beach. Tom sat cross-legged in front of the driftwood fire, watching the fire crawl up white bleached tree limbs and the embers pile higher. With his back to the men he looked like a Buddhist supplicant drowning in the mysteries of a waterfall.

Sam stepped forward. "Hey. You there."

Tom turned his head. His face caught the flickering rage of the fire, exposing his Dresden bombed nose, jumping into sharp relief his Plain of Jars cheeks and deepening the irregular purple-red gougings of his lunar pockmarked forehead. A small strand of hairs grew from the remnant of a chin. More numerous, the hairs of his patchy mustache helped define where his upper mouth ended and his lower lip started. So many months of fingers prying out blackheads had blurred the line. Possibly because he sat so close to the fire his face glistened with a prodigious amount of sweat.

As Mike and Steve entered the circle of light they flinched almost on cue. Tom smiled a knowing smile. He'd seen that look many times before. It was an old and dear friend.

Hesitating just long enough to be rude, Sam said, "Has anyone been by?"

Tom shook his head. The lighting shifted the shadows on his face, giving the effect of tiny bugs continually crawling about, warmed by the fire to excess.

"I thought not." Sam forced a smile.

"Not a bad set-up," Steve unwelcomely interjected. "You've almost got it right. Great fire, romantic setting, but where's the beer and girls?"

"I'm too young to drink." Tom quickly looked back at the fire. He poked the embers with a shovel deepening the cavity beneath the logs.

"Come on Steve. Cut it out. Let's get going." Mike grabbed his arm. "Have a good time. And be sure to put out the fire when you leave."

Sam lingered behind. "If a girl, Bonnie Camford is her name, happens to come by, would you tell her to go home. Her parents are worried. Okay? Would you do that for me?"

"They've got nothing to worry about." Tom didn't turn around. "She's

in a far better place than here."

That's what Steve keeps telling me, Sam thought as he walked to join the others. "Just remember what I said."

Catching up he was in time to hear Steve say, "Brother, does that bring back memories." He gave a mock shudder. "When he smiled I was afraid I'd get squirted."

"You could have laid off of that crack about girls," Mike snapped.

"Fun and games. He'll grow out of it."

"Not likely. Those scars are for life."

"That's just too bad," Steve prickled. "He may look like the dog's dinner but he doesn't have to act like one. If he offered me some food, I would have been more sociable."

"He didn't have any food," Sam said.

"What's the matter? You've got a cold? He was cooking something, pork or chicken. Probably potatoes and corn on the cob. The smell was everywhere."

Sam looked at Mike.

"I smelled something."

"Sure." Sam looked back at the now distant fire. "You get some tin foil, butter and season the inside, drop the meat in, seal it and bury it in the fire. You've got to be careful not to burn it. Turn it once or twice . . . Voila! A feast fit for a king." Steve stopped talking, quite satisfied he'd awakened hunger in Sam.

Sam flashed his light on the ground he'd just walked. An odd dull look crossed his face. Discounting their own recent tracks and Tom's, the sand held a mystery. "Look at that," Sam pointed. "Here we walked." He traced the path with light. "Over there Tom came from the forest . . . dragging something . . . "

"I told you. The kid's a pig-out. Wouldn't be friendly . . . "

"Hey! Where you going?" Steve yelled at the running Sam.

Sam took a deep breath. Later after he finished digging, he'd take another.

Steve was outside watering the lawn that Sunday morning when officer Marincheck pulled by the curb.

"Steve, about your statement," he said through the rolled-down window.

After adjusting the sprinkler and dodging the spray Steve jogged over. "You got Mike's and Sam's. Why'd you need me?"

"Orders. You know how it is. Push this paper. Stamp this. I'll give you a ride to the station."

Steve tapped the car roof. "Okay. Let's do it. Just let me move the water. I got this damned maple tree with yellow leaves, I woke up this morning and there it was yellow leaves."

"If it's not one thing, it's another," the cop agreed.

In the car Steve welcomed the shade. Today was going to be a scorcher. "I didn't have much to do last night. Sam's the hero. If heroes find bodies." "He saved us a lot of man hours. We're grateful."

"I am too. No telling what that nut would do next. You should have seen him scream when old Sammy tore into that fire. Spitting and cursing about virgins, Gods, sacrifices and volcanoes. I'll sleep better knowing that creep's behind bars."

"Ain't it the truth." They stopped at a red light. "She must have been horrible to see."

"She was." Steve tapped the side window. "But she sure smelled good. Something like pork.

"Will you look at that," Steve directed. All along the roadside the trees were tinged yellow. "It's spreading. Must be some damned blight."

The light turned green and they drove off. They could still ride the roads. The rising heat had yet to buckle them.

## Rapid Transit

## Wayne Allen Sallee

This is a rare piece of prose fiction from Wayne Allen Sallee, who is primarily a poet—and I think you'll agree that having had 136 poems accepted for publication in the past two years does qualify one as a poet to be reckoned with. Born September 9, 1959 in Chicago, Sallee explains that "Rapid Transit" was written for his final paper at the University of Illinois, where he received a B.A. in English Literature. Just now he works as a credit analyst in Chicago.

Sallee's poems have appeared in Cat's Eye, Fire, Blue Light Review, Comet Halley, Calliopes Corner, Impetus, and many other publications. He has also written reviews for Castle Rock, two screenplays, a 61-page poem entitled "Desmond's Inferno," and is at work on a novel, Paingrin: The Biography of Randall Andrew Sink. And he has written a follow-up to "Rapid Transit" entitled "Take the A Train."

Waiting for the Douglas L on the final day of Indian summer, Dennis Cassady saw the woman slowly and relentlessly knifed to death in the field below the platform. He had been standing, unaware, for several minutes, thinking about whether or not he should take the weekend off and boogie up to Milwaukee to catch the third game of the Series (since, let's not kid ourselves, if he lived to be friggin' ninety, the Cubs would still be looking at first place like a fourteen-year-old pimply-necked kid with one hand buried deep in his pants, drooling over the Playmate of the Month), and not until he looked down the tracks for the train did he notice her. She had not made a sound. He was standing behind a billboard that advertised a brand of cigarettes. The legend below the ad read: *True. You found it.* He realized with a sudden twinge of morbid fascination, which went sliding down his back like an ice cube on a hot day, that he had a perfect view.

The woman's jeans—he was sure that she had to be in her mid-twenties—her jeans were pulled down to her knees, and blood was running in fine rivulets down one thigh. The Western Avenue sodium vapor lamps

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cast a violet haze on the field, the kind of haze that you see at dusk in the summer if rain is on the way, and it made the blood appear livid and oily.

Her breasts were large, but he could not tell if she was attractive: her face was twisted in fear, eyes widened, nostrils flared, blonde hair matted with dirt. All of this surrounded a black pit of a mouth from which no sound came. Cassady's eyes drifted back to her spread legs and perfect thighs, they really were perfect, except for that ugly stream of blood that largely resembled a doctor's El Marko outline of some old bag's varicose vein.

The twinge he had initially experienced became stronger; he felt as if his entire body was starting to fall asleep. It ran across him in waves, like that time he had gotten hypnotized at Dilligaf's. The "mesmerist extraordinaire" (he called himself that; the guy was really just a two-bit showoff in a bouffant toupee) had said to Cassady: "You are getting sleepy. You feel a tingling in your fingers, a tingling in your toes . . . " and shit like that. He sounded like a queer, and Cassady ended up hypnotized into "becoming" Neil Diamond, kissing old women and running the microphone cord up and down his crotch.

But he wasn't falling asleep. He felt both excitement and curiosity at what was happening below him; how things were going to turn out. He felt the same as people must feel, who slow down their cars at the scene of an auto wreck, or who mill about the aftermath of a grocery store robbery, to see how many times the fifty-year-old Polish immigrant had been shot after his till had been emptied, and to maybe get their faces on the five o'clock news.

He didn't need his face on the news; not at all.

Cassady thought about that Don McLean song that he and Sarah had listened to in high school. I feel the trembling tingle of a sleepless night . . .

Only the girl in the song had chestnut-colored hair that fell across her pillowcase.

The field below was in the process of becoming the early stages of a project about which Cassady knew nothing. A lime-green construction shack with *Myers and Sons, Winnetka* printed in three-dimensional blue on its side stood at the far end of the field. Beyond that was the monolithic overpass of the C & NW Railroad. The railroad tracks ran beneath the L about twenty feet up; the two sets of ties cut the field off effectively and almost completely. He heard the man below him grunt—the sound of a car with a dead battery being turned over.

Maybe the woman will be lucky and the guy will have a dead battery,

Cassady thought, then she wouldn't end up in a Michigan Avenue abortion clinic telling the doctor: "Yes, it was my boyfriend, and yes, I know I should have come in sooner, but—" "—you were embarrassed, right? Well now, don't worry, just rest your feet in these stirrups; the hose won't hurt too much . . . "

The people who worked at the building from nine until six-thirty made picture frames. Moonlight splashed across third-floor windows; he could vaguely make out a small bottle of Jergens hand lotion, a miniature sentry that seemed to stare at him from the window sill. All the windows seemed to stare at him.

A nearly deserted CTA bus advertising *Nobody Does It Better: Channel Two News at 5, 6 & 10* split the night, droning by within ten feet of the two figures in the field. The driver's eyes mirrored the unblinking darkness of the building's windows, as they stared straight ahead toward the North Side and better neighborhoods.

The man—Christ! Cassady had paid hardly any attention to him at all—looked up as the bus hissed on. He had a full and unshaven face, white hairs spotted his beard. Broad shoulders pushed out from a checkered shirt, and his soiled shirttails were dangling out of the open fly of his Wrangler jeans. The man was wearing a pair of red Keds basketball sneakers that made squishing noises as he shifted his weight in the muddy tire tracks on the ground. His teeth were crooked.

Cassady was captivated by the clarity with which he saw these things. It was as if he were sitting in the sixth-row aisle seat in the Colony theater, secure in the darkness, stuffing popcorn into his mouth as some B-movie starlet is hacked at by some B-movie slasher.

The woman kicked at the man, who was still looking toward the street. He stumbled backward, howling, more out of surprise than anger. The woman staggered to her feet, jeans still bunched at the knees. The two moved in a drunken *pavanne*, the man trying to regain his balance, his arms flapping at the air; the woman attempting to turn away, her mouth now resembling a gaping wound.

Later, Cassady would remember everything that followed as happening with a cruel slowness, as if the field had been invisibly flooded with glycerine. Everything that followed, *everything*, ripple of muscle, ripping of flesh, blinking of eyes, expanding and contracting of lungs as air was inhaled and scream was expelled, all happened in slow motion, separate frames in a great motion picture. He could almost see himself breathing in slomo.

The man came forward again, a knife suddenly in his left hand—Cassady thought of a stiletto his father, a retired Monroe Street cop, had

shown him once; when he flicked the release button a six-inch blade jumped out uncaringly, capable of slicing flesh and bone alike, press it into somebody's backsnnikt! and their spinal cord is severed like so much butter. He heard the slow whirring of the movie projector again.

The woman took three steps backward before falling to the ground with a wet thud. A streetlamp near the corner flickered twice and went out. The man's arm descended in jagged flashes, as if a piece of film was slowing down and speeding up spasmodically, or maybe the scene below had been poorly edited and hastily shipped out for viewing to reap whatever profits could be made. The huge knife ripped twice into the woman's right breast.

Blood, a rich purple color in the streetlamp's haze, flowered across her blouse. A third thrust, this one accompanied by a miserable sucking sound as if the knife had entered the exact same entry hole as the previous stab, and the purplish blood sprayed out in all directions, and had the effect of a water hose being turned on with a thumb over the nozzle. The man was drenched, his pants and shirt had been streaked shiny in places, and the ejaculation of blood drove him into an even greater frenzy.

Then, only then, did the woman scream. It was the sound of something trapped—a child camping with his parents wanders into a foxtrap, which snaps around his tiny leg, crushing tiny bone. The rabbit staring into the muzzle of the shotgun. The mother who answers the phone angrily at two in the morning, starting to say "Can't you at least call if—" and being interrupted by the police captain.

Her arms wrapped frantically around her chest, clamping her life back in.

As her scream skittered down the empty street into the gutters and alleys, the man punched her below the right eye, and Cassady heard her nose break. It was muffled, like the sound of a pretzel being bit in half inside your mouth. Her skin began to swell, darkening her mascara, which had already began to run, minutes before. Not from tears, but from the man's spit.

He pulled her hair and her head snapped brutally forward, and then he casually let it drop back with a dull crack. All of this was of course happening in slow motion, the moonlight washed through the woman's blonde hair as her head fell back, and Cassady thought of a line from a Richard Lovelace poem: Shake your head and scatter day . . . What an absurd—

The woman screamed again.

The sound slapped Cassady's awareness with the intensity of his radio

alarm, going off to WBBM Hot Hits each morning. After the initial onslaught of the Go-Go's or Toni Basil singing about Mickey, whatever dream-thoughts still slumbered in his head disappeared when he dipped his contacts in icy tap water before putting them in, and he was left staring at reality: reflected in the bathroom mirror, a shabby two-room flat, and more clearly, a twenty-four-year-old man who looked older than he really was.

Cassady looked into the mirror in front of him and saw the knife high in the air. This is really happening, he thought. I can still save her! And he moved backward, quickly and quietly, past the Creepshow billboard that some half-assed Rembrandt had retouched in marker so that the cockroach coming out of E. G. Marshall's mouth was instead a giant black penis, past the small blue sign that gave the hours of arrival and departure for the Douglas trains, and he was finally at the phone and the man wasn't coming after him and the phone felt cold in his hand and there were initials carved into the wood of the bench next to him that said Juice L's LaVon and Latin Kings Rule and he dialed 911 and

All of this happened in little over three seconds in Cassady's mind. He was rooted where he stood like a corpse in its grave. He badly wanted to urinate.

The man dropped the knife straight into the woman's mouth.

It fell o god it fell ever so slowly. Straight down, like the swan dive of an Olympic swimmer. It fell, and Cassady saw the veins sticking out in the man's wrist, he held the knife so tightly. Knuckles white. Like her eyes. White and huge, the one had had been beaten purple looked as if it had been painted into its socket.

And the knife fell, and there were images of that 60 Minutes show on slomo filming and that shot of the drop of milk falling with the camera recording every 1/1000 of a second—the drop so gracefully falling into the dish and the splattering milk formed a tiny crown and one tiny globe stood balanced in dead center with a thin tongue of white reaching to pull it back down.

Cassady would remember later dreaming of the sound that the knife made when it ripped through the woman's tongue. It was like the sound the dentist's air hose makes when it is in your mouth and you have to swallow. Violet blood flew out of the mutilated mess that had been her mouth a moment before. The smell of blood filled the air and worked its way into Cassady's mouth. He tasted copper, and his own bile, deep in his throat.

The woman hitched out a cough. Another, convulsively. The man sliced her throat from ear to ear. He was smiling. The wind caught the 376

sharp odor of pickles and onions from the Wendy's several blocks down. Black pools welled up in the sockets of the woman's still staring O god why couldn't he have just raped me and masturbated in my face instead of KILLING me eyes. One hand clawed lifeless etchings into the mud. The man replaced the knife through his belt loop into an invisible holster, its blade grinning wickedly, and

he walked away. He simply walked away. Twenty minutes had passed, according to the flashing neon Seiko sign down the block.

The train pulled in several minutes after the red basketball sneakers had shrunk to a pinpoint and then to nothing in the darkness. Cassady walked disjointedly down the aisle of the last car, his ankle-length tranchcoat slapping against the seats. He was surprised that it was crowded, filled with simpering suburbanites intent on following the Governor's orders. Because of the rail strike, leave work a little early or stay a while longer, so we can all spread the rush hour out more, and hopefully, etc. Hopefully you'll get re-elected, right? Asshole.

And so, no doubt about it, everybody piles on to the 7:03, just like housewives throughout North Lawndale say to their husbands, "Honey, it's 8:00, let's get Junior's cords now and avoid the crowd." And without a fucking doubt, Cassady spends the last hour of work wishing he were anywhere but Jeans 'N Things.

He nearly tripped over a toad of a man sitting virtually on top of the doors. Thin, a scarecrow in a three-piece suit. Sunken shoulders, bony knees and ankles touching (as if he was a turkey trussed up for somebody's, probably his boss's, Thanksgiving dinner), eyebrows perched atop black plastic Sears Optical frames and neck muscles protruding from an ill-fitting collar twitched together in a mad fugue. A Cicero-Berwyn businessman working late. He smelled of Brut 33 cologne.

In the last seat, next to the conductor's booth, a pregnant black woman gazed out at the rooftops passing just below eye level. A small boy with huge brown eyes and a Walter Payton t-shirt sat tugging at her faded blue sweatshirt, vying with the dirt on the tenements for his mother's attention. Their clothes said off-the-rack Zayre's, and their faces had 18th Street written into every sad wrinkle, and in the dirt under their fingernails, too.

Cassady was able to get a seat in the back of the car. He slid down next to a man in work boots reading (most likely with some degree of difficulty, he thought) the new Robert Ludlum novel. Across from him sat two elderly women, one with a purple babushka wrapped around her head, both their faces buried deep in *The National Enquirer*. The head-

lines screamed to enquiring minds everywhere: Liberace Bombshell!, and in smaller print beneath: Boyfriend Tells All! Cassady remembered reading a headline from one of those tabloids once—his mother used to call them her "supermarket magazines," just like she used to call those idiotic soap operas her "afternoon stories"—and it said that Jerry Lewis was a UFO clone.

"My, my, that Prince Andrew going out with that Koo actress, and he just had to know that she appeared nekkid in those movies," Purple-Babushka said. The cloth was wrapped so tightly about her head that her evebrows were pulled back on her forehead like Mr. Spock's. "His poor mother, the Queen!" her friend lamented, her withered hand touching her cheek in actual concern. She was wearing whore-red nail polish. cracked in places. "What is this world coming to?"

Look around you and see, lady, Cassady thought. See if anybody cares that some woman was cut to pieces tonight and you all passed her right

on by and

I saw it happen!

none of you even bothered to look out of the window. Too caught up in your own damn lives and your own damn problems. Somebody could have seen the—her—body.

Hell, nobody was even looking at him.

Down the aisle, somewhere, a kid had his Sony Walkman turned too loud, and John Cougar was singing about Jack and Diane sucking down chilidogs outside a Tastee-Freez. Go for it, Jack-boy.

Cassady shut his eyes.

"... say, hey, Diane, let's go off behind a shady tree ..."

How about an Loverpass, Jacky-boy, that'll do the trick. Cassady could almost hear the sound of his own thoughts. He had an urge to laugh, loud and without reason. A madman's laugh.

And what could he have done about it anyway? His ears rang.

"... oh yeah, life goes on ..."

You talking to me, Jacky-boy? Cassady's mind was a black hole, and, except for the song, every single sensory feeling, the cold metal he rested his hands on, the smell of a pipe three seats up, even the old ladies' talk. was sucked into his brain and pulled into swirling blackness at thoughtspeed. It was like when you're walking down the street, maybe thinking the girl you're seeing, and you don't even realize that you're walking or that your legs are moving up and down at each curb; you turn down the right street without even looking at the sign and you only know that she throws her head back when she laughs and when she wears her red headband it drives you crazy . . .

Outside, away from his mind, shadowed buildings passed by at breakneck speeds. The floor of the car vibrated with the tempo of the rails underneath. Except for the armchair-espionage spy next to him and the two mental cases across the aisle, everybody sat with vacant stares, their heads bobbing in rhythm with the motions of the car like empty beer cans floating in the water off Oak Street beach, their eyes staring noncommittally at their reflections, washed black by the night beyond the rhomboid-shaped windows.

Inside, Cassady saw the woman's face, the man's face, with its twisted grin, grotesquely out of proportion, as if an egg-beater had been stuck in the middle of their faces, funhouse faces like the ones at the beginning of *Night Gallery*, leering . . .

"...long after the thrill of livin' is gone ..."

Go to hell, Jacky-boy.

The train made a hissing sound as it slowly pulled into the Central Park station, jolting Cassady's awareness as abruptly as a cop's nightstick jabs the wino on the park bench out of his drunken slumber. Cassady found that he had been staring at the "Life in These United States" signs lining the car, furnished as a public service by *The Reader's Digest* for your reading enjoyment.

He was one of a handful of people who were either poor enough or stupid enough to get off the train, the quality of the neighborhood being what it was, sprawled beneath him in two-dimensional decay, gang slogans in carnival colors sprayed on every shuttered and burnt-out building. He stood alone, hands gripping the railing, the wood rough on his fingers, and let the wind that carried the copper smell of blood into his nose twenty blocks east blow gently through his hair.

He looked down at his hands. They were strong, able hands, nails neatly trimmed. He began to examine a small scab on his right hand, just below the knuckles, a product of a careless slip of the razor while shaving. Methodically, like an old man whittling wood, he scratched at it until a tiny sliver flaked off. He stared at the ugly red skin beneath. Stretching the skin tautly with his other hand, he watched a small bubble of blood rise to the surface. The blood was thick; Cassady felt the sharp sting of nausea begin a slow pulse in his nose. Black patches grabbed at the corners of his eyes. His stomach heaved, and he was running down the steps two at a time, dumbly thinking that every time his feet hit the stairs and then the concrete, his socks were sliding farther down his calves. He felt his throat getting all gummy, and he knew it wouldn't be long before he threw up, like the time he downed a pint of Yukon Jack on Vic Raciuna's dare and gave Vic's car a new set of seat covers. That had been

outside of Lorenzo's, a Greek lounge on Halsted Street, where the owners called everybody "my friend" and the whole place smelled like gyros, and Cassady wished to fuck that he was there right now.

He fumbled for his front door key, his bladder doing a fast boogaloo. Blood poked through his scab again. The light in the foyer reflected off of it, made it look like spittle in a baby's mouth. He retched all over

himself.

It rained the next day. Cassady threw up several times in the morning; the taste of bile stayed in his mouth. He could taste it when he belched. He stared vacantly out of his window at life progressing down Ogden Avenue. Faces in doorways were kept dry by yesterday's racing forms, waiting for the rain to stop so their daily crap games could begin. A hunkered-down old man, the rain seeming to beat him into the ground, waited patiently for the bus, his eyes gently watching two young boys who did not know what rheumatoid arthritis was splash playfully in the puddles. The sky did not have a horizon: it was a bowl of smokestack-gray that was smacked down on top of everything, and as the afternoon progressed into early evening, the rain quickened, ripping its way through the trees, tearing autumn's last remains and smashing it to the ground in lifeless piles.

Through all of this, Cassady sat and watched as the rain beat against his window and eroded lines into his reflected face. Behind him, on the Quasar television set that he had bought hot last summer on Maxwell

Street, Eddie Haskell was calling The Beaver a little runt.

He was holding the cockroach in his hand. Had been for quite some time. He held it firmly between his thumb and forefinger; its legs hung limp. Cassady raised it to eye level; the roach met his stare with little disdain. He had found it creeping through the shadows of his kitchen. Remind you of someone you know? a dark voice had asked. NO! Cassady's mind overrode the dark voice and his eyes squeezed shut.

When he opened them, a million years after the knife's grin became too much to bear, he saw that he had ripped off one of the roach's legs.

The roach's attitude had not changed.

The tiny leg resting on his right finger resembled a woman's false eyelash. Cassady had never really seen a false eyelash; he just assumed that one would look like this.

He tossed the roach behind him, hardly heard it hit the floor. Let it bleed to death.

Four-thirty. Channel Seven gave the best account of the death of the woman. A voluptuous bleached blonde read from the teleprompter that

the woman's name had been Quita McLean—Quita after the heroine in the Harlequin Romance her mother had once read. She would have been twenty-three, and her sister said that she had always cried when the puppies were burned in the barn fire in Lad: A Dog. The television camera focused on a gray, withered old man who would not stop crying.

After a commercial break (in which time Cassady allowed more lines to erode his reflection, leaving clear, watery scars), the blonde came back to talk about a hostage situation in an embassy in Europe. One woman had been released by the terrorists—some fanatics wanting recognition for a dirtball country in the Middle East—because she had told him that she was pregnant. Suddenly Cassady remembered reading in the paper last week that a young woman who had been attacked on the West Side had told her assailant that she was pregnant so that she wouldn't be

you can't say it, can you?

raped. The man didn't care. He did it anyway. Twice.

"Christ, give me a break," Cassady whispered through his teeth, or maybe he only thought he did. He walked into the kitchen, reaching for a full bottle of Jim Beam, thinking that if he was lucky he would get liver failure. He was certain he hadn't said that aloud.

Out of the corner of his eye, his hand still on the bottle, Cassady saw his friend, the roach, limping erratically toward the safety of an empty Jay's potato chip box. Taking a dirty fork from the sink, Cassady stepped forward, lunging the fork into the roach's mid-section. It sounded like a taco breaking in half. He kicked it out of the way.

By the time the Fast Money round came on Family Feud, Cassady was sprawled in his living-room chair like a discarded rag doll. A rusted spring stuck out of the top of the chair, coming closer with each of Cassady's deep breaths to piercing his shoulderblade. The empty bottle lay on the floor beside him.

He dreamt.

"... as the Beaver."

"Mommymommy, Denny was playing with my Barbie dolls again!" his sister three years his junior, was singing. Her voice sounded like the broken record it still was. They were sitting at the dinner table and his mother—no, it was Barbara Billingsley, Beaver's mom; no, it wasn't at all, this was getting confusing—turned her head sharply at the revelation. She was wearing a pink housecoat, and pearls dangled around her neck. The housecoat was missing several buttons. From his chair across from his mother, who now stared at him from behind her fortress of Teflon, Cassady thought that he could not remember June Cleaver ever wearing a housecoat on the show before . . .

His father peered over the edge of his paper in slits. "He took their clothes all off, Mommy!" the stupid bastard was saying, and why didn't

she just shut the hell up?

"Did not did not!" Cassady became a broken record of his own, but his father was already standing, looming over his chair like an ogre, his belt coming rapidly off, making rough sounds as it passed through each loop of his pants. His beer belly fell forward, giving way to gravity now that the belt was not holding it back, and it sort of plopped into his potatoes. The belt made a flapping sound as it hit Cassady in the back

right where the spring in the chair poked through

"Faggot! Lousy faggot! Prissy Denny's playing with Corky the Retard!" The words were ritualistically chanted by several male voices; he couldn't see, scraping mud out of his eyes. He tasted dirt on his tongue. He blinked his eyes open, and no one was there except Sarah, and wasn't that strange because he hadn't met her until college, long after Jimmy Corcoran was beaten to death in an alley.

"Sarah!" his baby voice shrieked. "They hurt me, Sarah!" He felt embarrassed at the smallness of his voice.

"C'mere, you," she soothed, cradling his head,

fell away from the rusted spring

and he awoke in darkness.

Kee-rist! What a Grade-A bitch of a nightmare that was! He remembered parts of it, but not all, must like certain parts of songs that keep floating through your head

long after the thrill of livin' is gone

while you're walking down the street or waiting for a bus. Sarah, Corky, even a vague image of Mrs. Lavell making him recite the Lord's Prayer in French class. And the dolls. Shit . . .

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He sniffed the air. Smelled like—no, he hadn't crapped himself. Smelled like grass. Wet grass, how the inside of a lawnmower bag smells after you've cut the grass when it was damp with dew or rain.

But it was more than that.

He smelled something decaying.

the roach?

It was dark out—how long had he been sleeping?—and Cassady reached over to turn the lamp on. The tallow light flickered beneath a lampshade that depicted a panoramic view of Niagara Falls, and he screamed.

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Cassady's screams echoed through the thin walls and bare floors, but Audrey and Willis Fenton, who were watching *Magnum P.I.* next door, didn't hear anything.

Because the scream never made it to reality; it was a sob that welled up in his throat like so much phlegm. It was the sound that the woman had made just before the man had let the knife drop into her mouth.

And she was lying on his living-room couch.

She was naked. And she was dead. Her skin had become green and cheesey-looking, like that of a person who'd been receiving treatments for advanced cancer. Her eyes were open, sunken down into their sockets, mucus running over the sides like badly-prepared eggs, leaving dried yellow pus lining the rims of her eyelids. One eye stared lollingly at the ceiling, the other focused above and to the left of the television, which was sputtering in static. Her hair was white and alive with maggots. The skin was pulled back tightly around her lips, a death-grin of dried leather. Mud was caked on her gums and her cheeks. Blood spattered her teeth. Her hands clawed . . .

Cassady felt a sharp tingling in his crotch. At first, he thought he had urinated. A pain shot through his testicles. Sharp and quick, like when he sometimes rode his tenspeed when his shorts were too tight, and he pumped his legs too fast.

He looked down.

There was movement under his pants.

His testicles drew up. Cassady pulled the pants away from his waist.

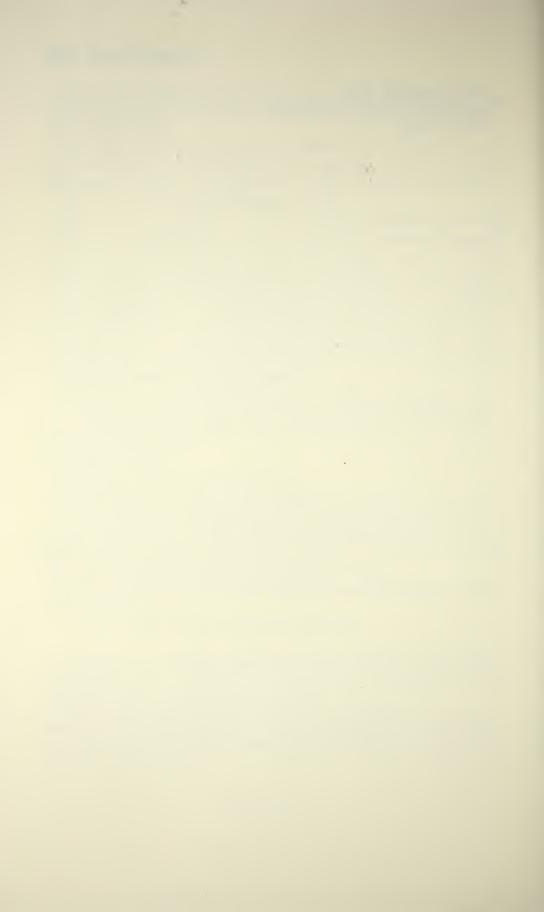
A cockroach the size of a half-dollar was tangled in his pubic hairs like a fly in a spider's web. Its legs backpedaled madly; with each revolution the skin below Cassady's navel tugged outward in small, flesh-colored tents as the cockroach became more tightly entwined.

It looked up at Cassady, and the shadow of its antennae slashed a huge V across his bare chest.

Cassady screamed again. This time, it was real.

He awoke in a cold sweat. Shaking. It was evening; the lamp was off. A talk show was on the television, and Bryant Gumbel was asking Alexander Haig if he really was Deep Throat.

Dennis Cassady did not move from the chair for hours. He sat like someone in the later stages of senility, eyes glassy and vacant, lips quivering. Later, he would tell Sarah what had happened to him. He would tell her everything. But that evening, he sat. He scratched the scab on his hand. He let it bleed.



# The Weight of Zero

#### John Alfred Taylor

Born in Springfield, Missouri on September 12, 1931, John Alfred Taylor earned a B.A. from the University of Missouri and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. He currently teaches English at Washington and Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania. While he has published some 300 poems in various little magazines over the years, Taylor's output of short fiction has been relatively small, with appearances in Twilight Zone Magazine, Weirdbook, Galaxy, Galileo, and elsewhere. Despite this dearth of publication, Taylor has had stories selected for both The Year's Best Fantasy Stories and The Year's Best Horror Stories.

"The Weight of Zero" is the beginning of a novel in progress. Twilight Zone Magazine called it "an erudite and ambitious foray into the nihilism and decadence of the '90s." Taylor confides: "The germ of the story was reading about the cult of Ravachol and about Marie de St. Remy: the names of the Universellist publications and the quotations are authentic. So is the song about dancing to the sound of dynamite."

Finish the book, John.

The toadlike concierge pointed upward and held out four fingers when Constantine asked for M. Richards. The stairs were steep and narrow, reeking of garlic and fish and urine, nearly dark after the fierce sun. Knocking on the peeling green paint of the door, he waited more than a minute without hearing a sound, wondering if the concierge's grin had been pleasure at seeing an Englishman climbing on a fool's errand. It might have been his accent; people had been smirking ever since his arrival in Toulon. But his accent was Parisian, not Provençal-provincial like theirs . . .

Nothing stirred within, so he raised the brass head of his cane and rapped on the door again. Loud in the constricted space, but through the last echoes he detected a soft shuffling on the other side. The lock clicked and the door opened a bare few inches.

"Tony?"

"Beg pardon, Constantine. Couldn't tell it was you." His half-brother stepped back, swung the door wide so he could enter. There was more visibility beyond, thanks to a dirty skylight, and at first glance Constantine thought Anthony had changed little in the last four years.

He was thinner; because Anthony was in shirtsleeves and wore no tie, Constantine could see the cords of his neck around the gap between the collarbones. But his face seemed as youthful as ever till he turned sideways to the light and showed the fretted wrinkles round his eyes. "You haven't changed a bit."

Anthony's smile flickered like lightning. "Exile becomes me."

He led the way inside, gestured toward a chair. "Welcome to my humble attic." Lowering himself gingerly onto the broken seat, Constantine peered about. There was a desk of sorts, a narrow bed, a table with basin and pitcher all furred with dust in the bleak light. Lurid chromos and etchings ripped from journals decorated the wall.

Anthony gestured a bit too broadly. "After all these years my brother seeks me out. Before we fall on each other's bosom, a libation is demanded." He leaned over the table. "Unfortunately I have no brandy, but there is absinthe—"

"Too early in the day for me." Constantine arched his hands over the head of his cane and watched as his half-brother added water to the sickly stuff.

Anthony sat down on the bed. "Cheers," he said, watching Constantine unblinkingly over the rim of the glass while he sipped the clouded liquid. "Again welcome, but there must be some special reason for this visit in person—"

Constantine almost wished he'd accepted a glass of absinthe. Best go straight to the point. "You know the girl is dead?"

"I heard—in the asylum."

"She never regained her right mind," Constantine announced solemnly.

Anthony smirked. "Naturally."

"I must say you take it rather lightly."

Anthony lowered his glass. "I knew beforehand. She wanted to see some actual magic. Quid pro quo."

"You mean she had to pay with her sanity?"

"No, dear brother—I had to pay with her sanity—that was the price my—instructors—asked."

Constantine tried to keep his voice under control. "Was it worth it?" "Yes."

"Monstrous!"

"You don't understand, Constantine, and I couldn't explain. There is knowledge worth any price, jenseits von Gut and Böse, as Herr Nietzsche would say."

"I don't speak German."

"'Beyond good and evil.' But perhaps your Mr. Kipling says it better for you. 'Down to Gehenna, or up to the Throne,/He travels the fastest who travels alone."

"I know which way you're going."

"Not exactly filial. And inexact; there are thrones and thrones."

"And principalities and powers," added Constantine.

"Sound doctrine, Constantine, sound. But to the point—What brings you here? I suppose you were sent to tell me I can come home now it's safe—"

Constantine squeezed the head of his walking stick till it hurt. "Just the opposite."

"Oh dear. Might I ask why?"

"Anne is engaged to be married. A very good match. If you came back the scandal would be raked up again—"

"And poof—the very good match is blown out, eh? I understand, I commiserate. And promise not to come back. At a price."

"What price?"

"Twenty-five pounds more per month."

"Twenty-five more! What do you do with what the bankers send you now? You could live so much better than this."

"I have rather special expenses."

"Drink? Women?"

"Nothing so quotidian. Twenty-five."

Constantine sighed. "All right. I think I can persuade them."

"If you can't, Anne can." Draining his glass, he stood up to pour himself another drink. "Changed your mind?"

"Just a little, perhaps; I've never tasted it."

"All right," said Anthony, "and for you, a clean glass." He pulled out a surprisingly fresh handkerchief to polish the tumbler. "Just a little," he said as he poured, "and lots of water. The water may be the real risk—it takes years for the wormwood to affect the brain."

Constantine took the offered glass, sipped gingerly. The blend of bitter wormwood and sweet anise was strange, and he couldn't help making a face.

"It grows on one," laughed Anthony. "And how are things with the family?"

"Everyone's well."

"Has Father a woman?"

Embarrassingly for a man of the world, Constantine found himself blushing. "Of course not—he's never gotten over your mother's death." "He's no eunuch."

"No, but—" Desperately, Constantine looked about, wondering how to change the subject. One of the chromos caught his eye. "My Lord!" "What is it?"

Constantine pointed. "It's Saint Denis carrying his head. You're not leaning toward Rome, are you?"

"Certainly not." Then Anthony followed the direction of his finger and laughed. "Oh no. In spite of the halo. That's Ravachol."

"Who?"

"An anarchist executed some years ago."

"Now you're an anarchist?"

"Not in any earthly sense. But that next picture's Ravachol, too—this time surmounting the guillotine."

"Seems a bit blasphemous, so like Christ resurrected."

"Positively. But I *know* Ravachol is resurrected. More than I can say for the other."

"Tony!"

His half-brother smiled. "The universe is larger than you think, and has possibilities unmentioned in *The Book of Common Prayer*."

"A guillotined criminal resurrected?"

"As with beauty, criminality is in the eye of the beholder. And he's resurrected only by becoming part of something enormously larger—"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I could show you, though you still wouldn't understand."

Constantine drummed irritably on the floor with his walking stick. "Nonsense is difficult to understand."

His half-brother smiled "Not nonsense."

"What else do you call it?"

Anthony reached into the open collar of his shirt, pulled out a gray metal plaque on a cord. "I call it nothing; it has no name in any mortal language."

Constantine blinked; there was a crucifix cast into the plaque. Perhaps Tony was lying about not being attracted to the Roman faith? His half-brother smiled, stroking the plaque lovingly with his forefinger. For a moment his smile froze, and it was as if there was no presence there, as if the teeth and muscles of the face were being operated by something as far away as Saturn, as if the eyes were glass. Then Anthony dropped

the pendant back inside his shirt, and was himself again. "And where are you staying?"

"At the hotel by the Gare."

"Always the railway hotel, oh constant Constantine?"

"It's convenient."

"No doubt. But don't eat there."

"Are they unsanitary?"

"Not at all. But the cooking is almost British in its dreadfulness."

"So what do you recommend?"

"There's a restaurant a few blocks from here—inexpensive, but very good. Of course, I'd rather you paid for both of us."

"All right."

"But let me show you the sights of Toulon first."

The heat of the day had gone, and Anthony showed Constantine Puget's caryatids at the Hôtel la Ville, the monumental gate of Vauban's arsenal, the Grande Rade and Petite Rade with their ranks of masts, the Quai Sebastapol, before giving the cabby directions to L'Arbre Vert. "Not that there's a tree near, green or otherwise. But the food is good, and the wine's cheap."

The sun was still above the horizon when they arrived, but the gaslights were already burning, pallid blue whispers against the whitewashed walls. At least there were tablecloths and respectable families solemn at the rite of chewing and swallowing.

"I recommend the house wine. Nothing extraordinary, you understand," Anthony said when the waiter came. Constantine settled on bouillabaise and poached sole, and his half-brother ordered consommé and fresh asparagus. "I eat less than formerly," he explained. "It increases my ability to concentrate—a sharp focus is as necessary to the mind as a burning glass."

"Necessary for what?"

Anthony answered with an almost imperceptible smile. "That would be telling."

"Charades are amusing at Christmas, Tony, not now. You aren't involved in something political?"

"Certainly not. Just because I have pictures of Ravachol on my wall doesn't mean I spend my nights making bombs or plotting with bearded sons of toil."

Constantine laughed. "Just for an instant I did wonder. But you're right, it does sound absurd. Though I've never understood why you left Paris to come here."

"Ravachol had something to do with it," his half-brother said. "In a manner of speaking, that is."

That moment a girl of fifteen or sixteen arrived with their soup. Her hair was long and black, heavy as a helmet, her eyes accented in an Eastern way. She brushed against Anthony as she served his consommé, and her sullen face lit up with a smile. "My occasional mistress when I feel the need," he explained after she was gone. "Half-Arab. Almost as good as a boy."

Constantine blushed. "Don't talk rot."

"I was only making an observation from experience, dear brother. You're on the other side of the Channel now, so you don't have to maunder about the Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name. The sort of phrase that poor silly Oscar would coin. I read he's in France too, now that he's out of gaol."

"Yes."

"Come, come, Constantine. Enjoy your bouillabaise—I won't discuss boys or girls any more."

"You were saying Ravachol had something to do with your coming to Toulon."

"Was I?" He spooned up another mouthful of consommé, savored it. "Oh well, explaining that won't do any harm. I came down here to meet a lady who talked to Ravachol after he was guillotined."

"After?"

"Repeatedly."

"A spirit medium?"

"You might call her that. Though perhaps prophetess would be a better description. That's what her followers called her." He fell silent to pour himself another glass of wine.

Constantine put his spoon down with an audible clank. "Just who is this prophetess, and who are her followers?"

"Was, dear brother, was. The late Marie de Saint-Rémy, vates of the local Universellist sect."

"And are you one of these Universellists?"

Anthony looked at him, shaking his head in admiration. "Constant Constantine. If not the Church of Rome, then the Universellists . . . No. They bore me, though their prophetess was of great interest."

"I don't understand."

"Let's say that she was under the influence of a higher power. Like Ravachol, Vaillant, Henry." Tony began to sing to himself in French, just loud enough for Constantine to hear the words:

"In the past our forefathers Danced to the sound of cannon. Now the tragic dance Needs a louder music: Let us dynamite, let us dynamite!"

Outside, the rooftops swam in violet light. Anthony suggested it was too fine an evening not to walk, that his room was just far enough to allow a breath of air.

Ahead a pair of sailors haggled with a woman under a streetlamp. Anthony laughed to see Constantine look away in disgust. "If you feel this way in Toulon, how can you go anywhere in London?"

"One knows where to go."

"Your club perhaps. Otherwise they're ubiquitous. Ask the French; they come to London and they are shocked at our regiments of soiled doves. And there's a new recruit every minute—the Ripper was fighting the tide—a quire of whores made for every one he killed."

"Tony!"

"But Jack knew what he was doing—"

Constantine stopped dead and glared at his brother. "I'd rather you didn't indulge your morbid taste in humor just now."

Anthony bent his head apologetically. "No humor intended. Just that the Ripper was serious—"

"Most madmen are."

"Not mad, Constantine. Only doing what was demanded. Like the judge who sentenced the Haymarket Martyrs, like whoever actually threw the bomb in Chicago . . . But Jack was the one who gave the clue." "Clue?"

"That there was something preternatural involved—"

"There's nothing preternatural about butchering prostitutes."

"Not so much that, though some of the mutilations and dissections were unusual. No, what I'm talking about is his invisibility."

Constantine shook his head bemusedly. "You should write for the shilling-shockers."

"You haven't studied the reports," Anthony whispered. "Blood was still pouring from Long Liz Stride's throat when the carter found her in the yard, and he'd come in by the only gate. And Catherine Eddowes was dead as well within the hour. Then think how often he struck in areas where the police were hunting him in force—"

"So he said the magic word and disappeared?"

"Nothing so puerile. But nobody knows his name after a decade, and he may not know he was the Ripper."

Constantine grunted irritably. "You always had a taste for paradox."

"Not a paradox, dear brother." Anthony stepped around a melon rind on the pavement before continuing. "Jack was a tool. Or a toy. Like his victims. Like the judge in Chicago. Like Ravachol and his executioner. All of them tools or toys."

"At least your speculations are entertaining, Tony. But a tool or toy demands a user—"

"Exactly. A user. I had communicated with it before—or maybe them. There's really no way of knowing whether it's plural or singular—"

"Our name is legion, eh?"

Anthony slowed his gait and glanced sideways at him. "You mustn't translate everything into familiar terms. What I was in communication with—or communion, perhaps; difficult to find the right word when the contact was so glancing and oblique—was nothing you'd call God or Devil, though it has powers like one or the other, and in its detachment—"

Constantine stared back. "You seem to have settled for the singular."

"Only for convenience." Anthony picked up his stride. "And its detachment is demonic or divine—who can say? But detachment transcendental, absolute as its power. That may be the real terror—it or they don't understand us any more than we can understand them or it. But it can manipulate us."

"I am not convinced." Constantine looked up at the narrow strip of night between the façades. "There's nothing there in the dark except more nothing. Zero had no singular or plural."

Anthony's laugh was dry as a cicada's cry. "Not unless zero comes in its full weight."

When Tony unlocked his door and struck a match for the gas fixture, the tiny flame made the room distorted and enlarged, as if it were only the antechamber to the huger darkness pressing on the skylight. But with the gas mantle lit and adjusted, the room's drab normality returned.

"Sit down," Anthony said, and went to the table with the glasses. "Want one?" he asked, pouring himself an absinthe.

"Not for me," Constantine said. "I can't stay; I'm taking the early train tomorrow."

"Too bad. Then I'd best convince you quickly." He sat down, his eyes glittering in the gaslight. "After leaving England so precipitously, the power which had instructed me withdrew from all communication. I was

only one step up the ladder, so to speak. Paris seemed the only place to go; it was a center of occultists, some with genuine abilities, perhaps. I read Eliphas Levi, I involved myself with Sâr Péladon and his Rose-Croix, I attended Black Masses, and found no clue to the next step. But with the capture and trial of Ravachol, Vaillant's bombing of the Chamber of Deputies, the explosion in the Cafe Terminus, I recognized my instructor again. It had demanded sacrifice of me, now it was taking it through its priests of dynamite, and countersacrifice through its priests of the guillotine."

"Don't be ridiculous, Tony."

"No, it uses men as toys. And it likes to break its toys—or rather, have them break each other. This was only a suspicion, only an intuition, until I heard of Marie de Saint-Rémy, and came here. The first time I spoke to her, I knew, and with my help she learned more, and soon I was back in communication with the power. She was a bit mad, of course—sensitives often are. What comes in from outside is so out of scale, so foreign."

"Then what makes you so sure this isn't all madness?"

"Let me read you some of the things she said." Anthony raised himself, walked over to a corner. There were magazines stacked on the floor, and he searched through them quickly, to return with five or six. "These are Universellist journals, Le Christ anarchiste, L'Antéchrist, Le Journal d'outre-tombe, Le Jugement dernier."

Constantine snorted. "Impressive names, if one has a taste for melodrama."

Anthony opened the first one. "I marked the passages of special interest so I could study them . . . ah, here we are." He read in a slightly unnatural voice. "The authors of anarchist attacks are the harbingers of the movements of final destruction . . . These beings do not have names in any human language, and the title of God is too feeble to apply to them . . . They are the most divine and elevated powers that have existed up to the present. To make it clear, we can say that they are the Soul of souls, the Just."

"This is supposed to convince me? She's talking about Ravachol, Vaillant, Henry, not your unknown powers. High-flown, perhaps, but then you said she was a trifle mad."

"What about this?" said Anthony, leafing through another journal. "She says she 'will find the secret that will clear the earth of the *unclean* to make way for the *pure*.' She goes on to say she used her occult abilities to inspire bombings, and distributed magical forces among her disciples." He picked up a third issue: "'Hecatombs without precedent are needed to break the driving force of this society, fortified by the entire accumu-

lation of its crimes throughout the ages . . . great cataclysms which we have called down!" He put the journal down. "Well?"

"Fortissimo doesn't make the tune any more worth listening to, Tony. I'll believe in your outside power when I'm introduced to it. Or is it a them?"

Anthony flushed slightly. "It could be either." He gestured helplessly to the journals at his feet. "You want more than this?"

"Precisely."

"You realize it's impossible to introduce you to the power in the usual fashion. It's impossible even to see it. But you'll know it's here, though I want to warn you that the very presence of the intelligence is dangerous to the unprepared mind."

Constantine chuckled. "Fi fo fi fum, et cetera."

"I'm deadly serious, Constantine, not a stage magician building up his tricks with patter."

"You sound quite similar."

"All right, but on your own head be it." Anthony went over to the table, poured himself a finger of absinthe, drank it down neat. He was pale and sweating when he sat down again, though Constantine suspected it was more alcohol than terror.

"Aren't you going to turn the light down, Tony? It seems prerequisite to a séance."

Anthony smiling wincingly. "You've heard of the noon-day devil? This presence is like that. Midnight or afternoon in the Sahara are the same to it." He reached into his open collar, pulled out the plaque with the crucifix.

"Going to command the demon by the power of the cross?"

"Not exactly. A bit of protective coloring." He turned the plaque around on its cord. The back was covered with a patternless swirl of fine lines, parallel, zigzag, concentric, but even at this distance in the gaslight, Constantine began to see a pattern starting to emerge, a pattern that hinted at a meaning so strange and unendurable he was able to throw up his hand and twist aside before he saw too much.

He could feel himself shuddering as Tony exulted: "Now you begin to believe. These are Marie de Saint-Rémy's invention—or rather, what she was commanded to have made. Only two were cast. And the artisan who made them for us went out one night and drowned himself in the harbor. The power uses any means to hide itself from the uninitiated."

Constantine ventured a glance between his fingers. His half-brother was stroking the plaque again, eyes staring. His face went dead, mean-

ingless, as empty of personality as the frayed mask of an anatomical

diagram.

Then the presence was there. Anthony dwindled and twisted. Gravity seemed to tilt, though he was still in his chair with the walls behind him, and everything remained vertical. It was as if the center of the Earth was no longer the reference point, as if the presence made its own rules. For the first time in his life Constantine realized how rapidly the Earth was wheeling through space, felt the giddiness of its multiple motions rather than accepted them intellectually. Only the great being in the room with them was still, somehow impinging on this small rushing locus.

Tony had been right about his knowing the intelligence was there even when he couldn't see it. The way Constantine shrank instinctively from its foreignness, the automatic horripilation of the back of his neck, and the breathless, metallic taste in his mouth were testimonies. Worse was the sense that what was there was cold, so cold as not to be living in the usual terms, so intelligent it went beyond or beneath what intelligence usually meant.

If it stayed much longer he would die spiritually, blasted and crushed by the mere proximity of something so massively inhuman.

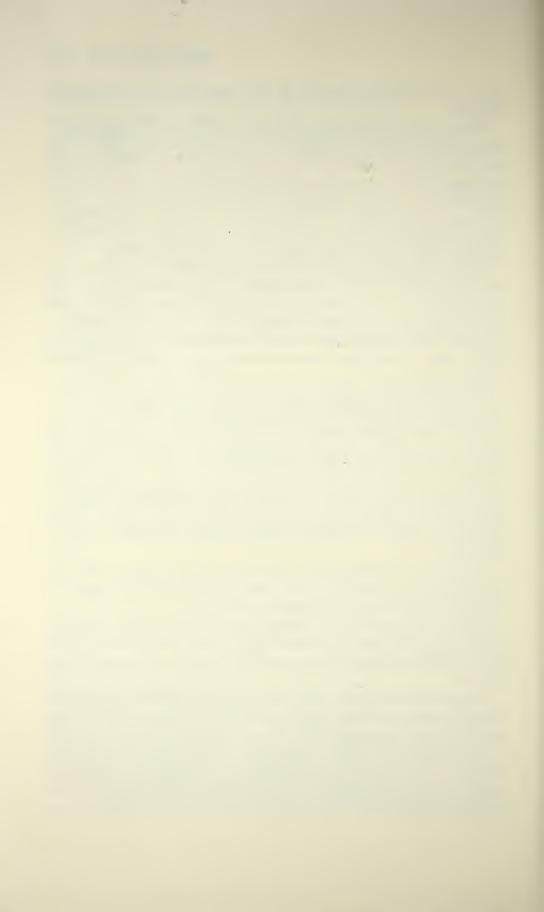
Tony's mouth opened as if it were being worked by levers, breathed in like a pump. The voice that emerged was strange in timbre, the rhythms of the words misplaced. "You have been told more than you understand—" It stopped, and breathed mechanically, waiting. "More than you should know. But your co-organism—the other branching—is the one who should be pruned. You know nothing—" The mouth pumped again. "Important. No co-organisms more distant—none who matter—will believe."

Tony's face writhed in what might have been meant as a smile. "Say goodbye to your near-branch. For now. You will join him ten years and eleven months toward us. Be part of us forever."

Constantine gasped as the weight of its presence vanished like a blown-out candleflame. His half-brother leaned bonelessly out of the chair, striking the floor with a sound that would haunt Constantine to the end.

Turned face up, Tony looked like he had been dead for hours, but when Constantine rushed down he asked the concierge to *faire venir le médicin* before his brother died. Let the physician explain—if he could.

Then Constantine climbed back up to take the plaque off his brother's neck and hide it. With so many arrangements to make, he wouldn't be taking the morning train. Except for Anthony and other objects, the room was empty. Nothing but darkness stared in through the skylight.



# John's Return to Liverpool

### **Christopher Burns**

"John's Return to Liverpool" is one of two extraordinary stories Christopher Burns published during 1985 in England's avant-garde fantasy magazine, Interzone. The other, a post-nuclear disaster mood piece, "Fogged Plates," seems appropriate from one who lives about a dozen miles from the Sellafield nuclear plant.

Born in 1944, Burns makes his home in Cumbria, on the coast of the English Lake District. Burns considers his writing to more mainstream than in the science fiction or fantasy genres, and most of his stories in recent years have appeared in such places as the London Review of Books, London Magazine, and the New Stories anthologies from Hutchinson. His first novel, Snakewrist, "about an English book cataloguer who gradually becomes drawn into the world of a vanished adventurer," was published by Jonathan Cape in London this past May.

HE CAME TO the door during the first frost of winter. Straight away she know who he was.

"You've come back," she said.

In the streetlight he looked bloodless. Behind him frost began to settle on the grass and blind the windows of parked cars. Children in heavy boots careered between the houses, turned corners sharply, yelled to each other through the drifting cold.

His hair was damp and his nose was thinner than it should have been. She thought of how she'd read that sniffing cocaine destroys the bridges, then felt guilty that such a small thing should have crossed her mind. It was nothing compared to the magnitude of his return.

His skin was waxen, as if it had been newly laid across the bones. "Can I come in?" he asked simply.

She didn't feel she had to say anything.

He sat down beside the coal fire but kept on his thick blue coat. Its shoulders sparkled with frost. His glasses misted up with the temperature

change and he unhooked them from his ears, cleaning them absentmindedly with a handkerchief. They were the familiar round frames. She noticed his hands were thinner and bonier than she remembered or expected.

"You've lost a lot of weight," she said quietly.

He nodded.

Dorothy got down on her knees in front of him and looked straight into his eyes. Without the glasses they seemed shortsighted and introspective. "The pounds have dropped off you," she said, "you can tell it just by looking at you. Your face is a lot thinner than it was. You were quite beefy when I knew you. There are lines under your eyes and your nose is so thin it looks like a blade."

"I was too fat a lot of the time in the early days." Despite all the years his voice was still flat and nasal.

"That may be, but now you're much too thin. I used to think that, you know. All that macrobiotic food isn't for you."

He smiled.

"John, you need a good feed."

He shook his head. "No. No food. I can't. But I still need sleep."

"Are you tired now?"

"I get tired very quickly. It's as if everything has drained away. All those energy levels just aren't there anymore."

"They'll come back," she said comfortingly. The firelight danced in his eyes. "You can have the spare bed. But first you must have a hot bath. The fire's been on all day so there's plenty of hot water. Don't argue, you need to get the cold out of your bones. It's been a long time, John."

"More than twenty years."

"I'm pleased you remembered me. Honored."

"I was never any good at keeping in touch. You know that."

"A lot happened. I got married." He looked suddenly uncertain, and she laughed. "Don't worry, it finished long ago. All I have left of him are a few photographs, some of his clothes and an old wedding certificate." Suddenly she felt tears at the corners of her eyes. They were so sharp they stung her and she shook her head in disbelief. "I still can't believe it's you."

"Oh, it's me all right. No doubt about it. Flesh and blood." He extended his hands and she grasped them, feeling the skin and the bones. She moved her fingers round until she could feel the slow pulse in his wrists.

She couldn't hold back the tears. They slid down her face. "You knew that if you ever wanted me I'd be here."

He nodded slowly, as if preoccupied.

She sniffed (she thought it sounded horrible) and said firmly "Bath."

"All right. Whatever you say. If I can stay . . . "

"Of course you're staying. For as long as you want. Now come on. You look as if you haven't been warm for days and your hair's in bad need of a wash."

For that moment his eyes looked uncomprehending.

"I'm not giving you a choice, John."

"Okay."

She ran the bath until the room was full of steam and dappled glass. He stood and let her undress him, making no protest, as silent as a patient. In the bath his feet stuck out of the water and she placed them on either side of the chrome taps. She washed his hair several times, relathering it, feeling it become cleaner beneath her fingers. She left him soaking while she washed his clothes. They had expensive labels but felt as if he'd been sleeping rough in them. She left the bathroom door open in case, in a trance with the heat, he slipped beneath the water.

When she dried him he felt warmer, healthier, more human. The water that dripped from his hair was warm. He even began to smile. He stood there, still pale but a little more pink, while she rubbed him dry with a thick white towel. She felt the rib, the muscle wall, the relaxed skin of his genitals, the slow thump of the heart. It was then that she asked him about the marks. They were distinct pinkish circles, almost like immature nipples.

"What are these?" she asked, trying not to sound as nervous as she felt.

He looked down.

"You must know," he said.

"Are they where the bullets hit?"

He nodded.

She tried to be calm, as calm as she could. "John," she asked, "are you dead?"

He laughed. He pushed his hair back with one hand. "Of course I'm dead," he said, "can't you tell? Don't you believe what you read in the papers?"

Later John sat in her husband's dressing gown in front of the fire. He stared into its flames, watching the black coal burning. He seemed content.

When he slept his hair fell across his eyes in a fine swath, making him look almost boyish. She pushed it gently back from his eyelids with her fingertips. He drew the blankets tightly about him like a child.

That night while he slept Dorothy filled his room with mementos of his life—posters, records, fan magazines, old photographs, a couple of books, a guitar with his name scrawled across it. Then she lay in bed, with a warm tide of fulfillment and trust flowing through her. She stayed awake like a guardian, and thought of him waking like a child at Christmas, lost in wonder at the Aladdin's cave of his own past.

He was already awake when she looked in. He sat by the bed in her husband's broadly striped pajamas. He picked through the collection, never dwelling for long on anything, but sometimes smiling and sometimes looking puzzled at this accumulation of evidence. Later she brought out the photograph album and together they looked at the pictures.

"You must have been our first fan," John said.

"I never claimed that."

"Didn't you? But you were always there. I remember we all liked to see you. You gave us a sense of security."

"I remember I felt quite possessive about you. When you started to make it big I thought you were being stolen by others. Firstly girls from Liverpool, then Hamburg, London—"

"Tomorrow the world," he said, and the cutting edge was in his voice. "Where was this taken?"

"Didn't you recognize Matthew Street?"

"Christ. Yes."

"Do you know everyone on it?"

"That's me. And you, and that girl who used to sometimes come with you. With Pete Best, George. That's Ringo when he was with Rory Storm. That's Rory's girlfriend. This must have been just after Stu died."

"Not long. We were all terribly upset about that."

He put his hand up to his face and spread his fingers in an unexpectedly feminine motion.

"We wanted Paul on the photo but it all got a bit chaotic," she laughed. "He came back to line up the camera with me and I took this by mistake. I just pressed the shutter too soon. And it was the end of the film."

He tilted his head back and laughed. She could see hollows at the base of his neck. "Look," he said, "I can remember a lot about those days. All of a sudden."

They reminisced about the old days. About old songs, places, friends. Endless loves that had lasted a few days, wild ambitions that were never airborne; a time when all the future had lain before them. John was

relaxed and amusing, telling tall stories, most of them true, with all his old flair of pithiness and zest.

"Come on," she said finally, "it's time you ate." He shook his head.

"It must be twelve hours since you arrived," she said, "and you haven't eaten or drunk a thing. You must try."

"No," he said, "leave it."

She left it a moment and then said, "It'll do you good to have a meal." "Don't let me stop you," he said.

So she ate on her own.

Later she dressed him in a pair of jeans and a black sweater. They were both slightly too big for him. "His shoes will be a size too large, as well," she mused. "Maybe we could find some really thick socks so they won't be too uncomfortable."

"You know I'll have to revisit the old places."

She nodded. "I knew they could never kill you," she said. "I knew you'd come back."

He thought about this for a long time. "I always knew it was possible," he said at last. "We thought about it a lot."

"What happened? What really happened?"

"He got me all right. You go through life tensed up for the unexpected, and when it happens  $\dots$ "

He gripped her arm. She felt her limb go numb the grip was so tight. "You mustn't tell anyone." he said. There was urgency and a slight bitterness in his voice.

She shook her head, mute.

"I mean it," he said, and all the old menace and unpredictability were there. "No one must ever know."

"I swear it."

"No one."

"My arm hurts."

He let go of her. "Sorry," he said.

Within a few days he was leaving her for several hours, slipping out of the house at dusk with a turned-up coat collar and a pulled-down hat. Sometimes when he returned he would tell her where he had been—to where his mother lived, or Aunt Mimi's old house, or Penny Lane, or Matthew Street, or Strawberry Fields. Sometimes he said nothing, but stared into the fire, red light edging his face. She would pretend to watch the television but all the time keep her eyes on him. He still had not eaten, and she was becoming increasingly concerned. She once suggested calling a doctor and he was mercilessly sarcastic to her, asking did she

not know that a doctor could do nothing for the dead—only angels and undertakers were of any use to the dead.

So she had rich, hot, heavy-smelling meals prepared for herself, hoping that they would somehow trigger hunger in him. But he remained indifferent, and all the time got thinner.

And although at times he was his old charming self, he often drifted away into silence and introspection, gazing for long periods at nothing. In this relaxed, almost exhausted posture he looked like a man recuperating, lost between ordeals, resting between battles. It was then that he became a stranger, a foreigner in his own land, unwilling or unable to grasp the everyday event. He had no trouble in refusing to answer her.

Over the next few days he offered her four versions of the afterlife. She only asked him about it once but he could not let the matter rest. When he described them there was an edge to his voice. He was like a man betrayed, cheated out of his inheritance.

In the first of these he told her of an afterlife like a children's heaven. There he would meet again all those he had loved, including the famous Julia, his mother. "She's there all right," he said, eyes glittering, "it's just the way you think it should be. All your friends, all your relations. It's like one big, endless, happy childhood. Like soft, neverending protection. The lion lies down with the lamb."

The second was a rock'n'roll heaven. "They're all up there," he said, moving his hand in a slow arc and looking up at the ceiling. He was like a parody preacher. "Presley, Hendrix, Holly. They make music too great for mortal ears. And the girls are always beautiful and always available." He stared directly at her, daring her to take him seriously.

A third version, the Eastern version, spoke of cycles of incarnation, of moments of insight between death and birth during which one saw with a clarity that Earth could never match. Life was an ascent or descent through stages of self-knowledge. One plunged down the spiral toward the senseless and inanimate or crawled up it toward the angels.

"And you?" Dorothy asked.

He sneered. "Why," he said, "I've always known where I was going. To the toppermost of the poppermost." It was the half-dismissive, half-serious phrase he'd used to cajole and encourage the others when they'd been struggling in Hamburg and Liverpool.

But John also offered the possibility of a fourth kind of afterlife. This was a spiritual existence, the survival of the mind without the body in a nexus of consciousness. Identities were individual and yet inseparable from the connections which passed through them. They were pulses in the eternal mind.

"And you've been part of this?"

Suddenly, without warning, he looked stricken and fearful. "I don't know," he whispered. She put her arms round him and he buried his head in her bosom. After a few minutes he had recovered.

Of course, she speculated about a fifth version. The dead returned to their old homes, haunting them, were restless and unsatisfied spirits until something finally laid them to rest. But he always felt so real in her arms.

"Come on," she said to him, "you're all right, John. You're here with me. You're safe."

"Do vou think so?"

"Of course, I know so."

"None of it's true, Dorothy."

"What? What isn't?"

His eyes were startling and honest, his cheeks thin. His hands looked large on the end of sticklike arms. "It's oblivion, you know," he said, matter-of-fact, "everything just sputters to an end, the body systems close down, consciousness just folds in on itself. There's no light, no dark, nothing. It's oblivion. Nothing. Forever.

"A dying man's life comes to him in a few moments before the end," he said bitterly. "And that's it. You go into death fooling yourself. Our only talent is self-deception."

That night Dorothy sat and watched television. John was already asleep; his periods of rest were getting longer and longer. Now it was common for him to sleep the clock round. Sometimes when the winter sun set she would ask him if he was going out; he'd shake his head and say he was tired.

She sat with a coffee and watched a soap opera, the news, and a documentary about medicine. In the documentary a doctor discussed the nature of the self. One's feelings were located in the self, he said, and that was paradoxical, for the self was unlocatable. Nobody knew where it was. As an illustration he showed amputees who still experienced sensations in limbs that were no longer there. When something vital is removed, the doctor said, the self creates an alternative—and it is too simple to say that this creation is fictitious. To the self, it is real.

"You've hardly changed at all," he said to her the next day.

"Haven't I?" She was flattered but surprised.

"You're just like you were all those years ago." He seemed bemused by this.

She laughed. "It's nice of you to say so, but it's not really true."

"It is. You even have the same figure. Girlish—that's the word. People change over the years. Look at me. But you, you're no different. You look

twenty-five years younger than me. Why, you even wear the same kind of clothes as you did then."

"I don't."

He nodded. It was slow. "You'd think you were still there, Dorothy. All around me it still belongs to the early sixties. There's only me that's different."

He shuddered. It was a spasm that ran through him, and he hugged his arms to himself to control it.

"I'm outside the time capsule," he said.

Dorothy stood up and looked at herself in the mirror. Afternoon light made her face white. She bent close to the glass. There were broadening strands of gray in her hair, webbings of lines at her eyes and mouth, and she knew if she pulled down the collar of her blouse she would find the beginnings of a scrawniness at the base of her neck.

John's fingers traced his chest until they found, beneath his clothes, the site of one of the bullets. He spread his hands over the area, pushed the flesh together. He was like a young girl discovering the beginnings of a breast.

"Dorothy."

"Yes?"

"I'm dying. I know it."

"You're not, you're not."

"I know it. I've been thinking stupid things, thinking that I'd survived it. I thought that somehow this was all true, that it was real, that I'd been given some kind of guarantee." He tilted his head downward. His hair fell forward. When he spoke again his voice was strained and unstable. "Because I can reach out and touch things, because I can touch you, I thought that was proof." He put his hands up to his face.

"John?"

When he looked up again the lower rims of his glasses had caught tears. They spilled out of the sides as he lifted his head. His voice shook. "It scares me," he said, "I'm terrified."

Once more she had to comfort him. She could feel his bones beneath the skin. There was so little flesh on him now she felt as if she were comforting a hunger victim.

"I'm tired," he whispered.

Even though it was only mid-afternoon she decided to put him to bed. He looked drained and ill, and she had to steady him as he walked to the bedroom. She helped him undress. He insisted that he did not have the

strength to get into any pajamas so she humored him and let him get into bed naked.

He lay and cried while she sat beside him and held his hand and dried his eyes. Eventually the grief seemed to exhaust him, and he quietened and then slipped into unconsciousness. She sat with him for a while. He still sniffed and trembled a little in his sleep, but gradually, as he slept more deeply, the distress left him.

Dorothy went back to the mirror, took off her clothes and stood in front of it. She studied herself for several minutes. The light was cruel

to her. There was no mistaking her age.

As she watched herself a feeling of unreality swept through her, loosening her understanding, releasing her grip. She felt floating, unresolved, half-imagined. It was a sickeningly dreamlike sensation, as if she belonged to something or someone else.

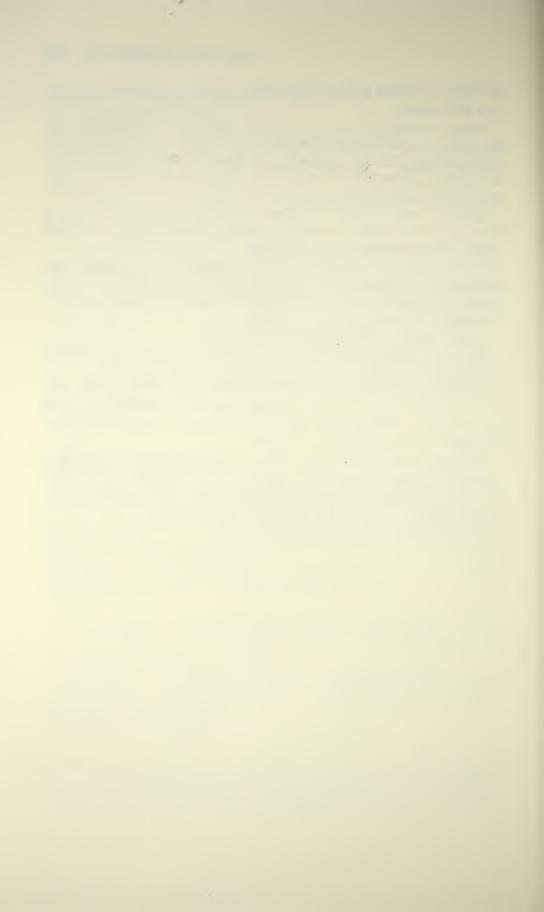
Weakened, she went back into the bedroom.

John lay beneath the sheets. He was quiet, still; his head was tilted back and his arms were down by his sides. His eyes were closed.

She lifted the sheets and slipped into bed beside him. He was cold. She wrapped herself around him, hoping that the heat of her body would warm him. He hardly moved. She could feel the slow pulse of his heart, the shallow peace of his light breathing.

Her fingers searched him until they touched the small round mark of a bullet. She ran her fingertips around it, touching it lightly, gently. After a while, like a newborn animal returning to its mother's teat, found the wound with her mouth, and fastened her lips around it.

She lay there quietly, waiting for the night.



### In Late December, Before the Storm

#### Paul M. Sammon

Born December 22, 1949 in Philadelphia, Paul M. Sammon has been a world traveler since childhood. Sammon saw much of the Far East—and not the side reserved for tourists—with his father, who worked in military intelligence. Later, Sammon's work as a journalist/filmmaker/publicist sent him on excursions throughout the world. Just now he resides in Los Angeles, where he has formed his own small film/video production company, Awesome Productions.

Readers who have attended major science fiction conventions may remember Paul M. Såmmon for his slide show presentations as studio publicist for such films as Conan the Barbarian, Conan the Destroyer, and Dune. Most recently Sammon has written, produced and directed the science fiction comedy, P.P.—The Planetary Pal. While Sammon has published over 150 articles, interviews, and critical studies in such places as Cinefantastique, Cinefex, American Cinematographer, Omni, and the Los Angeles Times, this is his first published piece of fiction. "In Late December, Before the Storm," according to Sammon, is based on a dream and is about an old girlfriend. He calls the story "a parable of conscience."

YESTERDAY MORNING the nervousness started. It always starts that way. With nerves. I lay staring upward on the sweat-soaked sheets for nearly half an hour, not fully awake, not wanting to go back to sleep. Not thinking, either. Just feeling. Feeling the sour edge pulsing in my throat, feeling my tingling fingers, feeling a tiny blade of fear nicking at my gut with every indrawn breath. The dirty gray ceiling above the mattress blotted out my thoughts like the end of all hope.

I bit a fingernail. Slowly one word bubbled up into consciousness. *Today*.

That's when I rolled out of bed. I dressed, went to the kitchen, and broke a few eggs in a pan. After I'd eaten, I had my first cigarette. It tasted terrible.

Then I remembered the calendars.

It's funny about calendars; I used to like them. At one time the two of us enjoyed jotting down comical little notes on those oversize monsters you can find in office supply stores. We enjoyed X-ing out the last days before the wedding. We even had two calendars in the house, one blackly webbed with scribbling, one clean and fresh.

Not anymore. Now I can't stand the damn things.

But I still need them.

I dumped the dirty dishes in the sink, pushed aside the rusty screen door on the back porch, and walked down the creaking wooden steps that lead out into the backyard. The calendars were there, hidden somewhere in the tired little shed the realtor had once shamelessly called a garage.

The screen door slammed behind me. I looked back at the house.

It's a small place, almost a cottage. When we first bought it the mortgage was as handsome as the building. Now that it's paid off, nobody wants it—the roof sags, and it needs paint. But no one complains. The far end of our place faces an empty canyon, and last summer the house next door was torn down. My nearest neighbors, the ones beside the weed-choked lot, don't even know I'm alive.

They drink. Almost as much as I do. At night I lie on the sofa in my cramped little living room, hazed by alcohol and the glow from a small black-and-white portable, and listen to them laugh... or scream.

The interior of the shed was cool and dark. It took me a while to remember where I'd hidden the calendars. I had to fumble around in the dim light with the stink of musty paper in my nose, poking through the stacks of her old clothes and my old tools until I found them. They were piled in a greasy cardboard box which had been pushed under a far corner of the workbench. I was probably drunk when I did that. I got down on my hands and knees, pulled the box out, and carried it into the house.

The container made a sodden thumping noise when I dropped it on the tiny kitchen table. I scraped back a chair, sat down, and regarded the box for a while. Then I glanced out the kitchen window. A leafless apricot tree quivered in the empty lot next door, its thin branches pawing at the fat leaden clouds behind it. For days the sky had been threatening to crack open. So far it hadn't.

I sighed, lit another cigarette, and pulled the pile of calendars out of the rotting box. A silverfish scuttled across my hand and forearm, then dropped to the floor near my foot. I crushed it.

There were nearly a dozen calendars in the stack, cheap little freebies

I'd impulsively picked up at banks and liquor stores. Last year's glared at me from the top of the pile. I pulled it away, flipped through its pages until I found December. A heavy red circle had been drawn around the twentieth with a felt-pen. Today was the twenty-second, which was just about right. It never happens on the same day, like birthdays or our anniversary, but it's always close. I still wonder about that.

A sudden tremor went through my legs, and my stomach constricted into a tight, painful knot. I closed my eyes and clenched my fists, concentrated on my breathing. My palms were damp. A long time ago I went to a doctor, before I really understood what was happening to me. He'd prodded, asked questions, then told me I was suffering from all the classic symptoms of acute anxiety attacks. Diligently I took the medicine he prescribed and the advice to "go slow."

It didn't work.

The cramp faded; the heat returned to my hands. I opened my eyes. Outside, the naked tree shuddered in the wind.

The rest of that day, crawled by with agonizing slowness. I did the laundry, I made the bed. I even swept a little. Finally I just sat, smoking as I watched the shadows lengthen. By the time the sun went down I was ready to jump out of my skin. I'd stayed away from the booze all day, knowing I'd need some semblance of sobriety later on, but with the darkness came the realization that I'd never make it without a beer. I got up and went to the refrigerator.

Pulling a can from the six-pack that had been tempting me all that long, long afternoon, I popped the tab and drained it in a simple swallow. The fluid coldness hit like a fist. Some of the tension leaked away.

By now it was so dark I couldn't see the apricot tree. I got rid of the empty, opened another beer, and sipped it. Slowly.

Time to leave.

In the bedroom I put on an old pea coat and watch cap. The mirror above her dusty vanity table reflected a pale, pulpy wreck, someone aged far beyond his thirty-odd years. I raised my can in a mock salute. The shabby man in the mirror drank with me.

Out on the sidewalk the house looked like a dark beast settling into a freshly dug hole. I finished the second beer and tossed the empty can onto the patchy lawn, then climbed into our van and pulled away into the night.

I drove for hours, moving aimlessly along the freeways. The van was wrapped warm around me, the tires whispering on the asphalt, the radio playing just below my threshold of consciousness. It was almost relaxing.

Most of a fresh six-pack lay on the seat next to me. Although I'd already finished four beers, that terrible mental clarity alcohol sometimes brings had sunk its fingers deep into my brain and stubbornly refused to let go. I was glad I'd stopped at an all night market for the fresh brew. I'd need it.

I drove and drank, drank and drove. Cruising. The electric landscape of motels and warehouses and harshly lit Christmas-tree lots looked alien, deserted, like an abandoned lunar colony.

Some time later I got off the freeway. My hands must have registered the huge pink-and-blue neon sign that shouldered up against the frontage road ahead, because my brain didn't; I'd rolled down the off-ramp and was turning into one of the two narrow lanes that ran alongside that same neon sign before I consciously realized what I was doing.

Suddenly I knew where I was going: to the movies. I'd pulled into a drive-in.

I hadn't been to a drive-in for a long time. They hadn't changed much. I pulled up beside the small concert ticket booth that divided the two incoming lanes. A kid who looked about seventeen stepped out. He was tall, thin, wearing yellow foul-weather gear. When he leaned his gaunt face in my window, I could count the pimples on it.

I said, "One."

He spotted the beer on the passenger seat and frowned. Then he craned his head to look into the rear compartment of the van. My age and the fact that I was alone must have satisfied him; he smiled slightly and took the four singles out of my hand. But then he hesitated.

"Are you sure you wanna go in tonight?" he asked in a reedy drawl. "I mean, the weather's pretty lousy. Could turn to rain. 'Course we'll give you a pass to come back if it *does* rain or if any fog comes in, but then you might not want to see another show here. Not for a while, anyway. It'd save you the trouble. What do you say?"

I grinned up at his hopeful face. I'd worked in a theater too, ages ago. I knew he wasn't being courteous. If he discouraged enough potential customers, there'd be a light crowd inside, and he'd then be able to convince the manager or projectionist to close up and shoo everyone away at the first heavy sprinkle.

Fuck him.

"I'll take my chances," I said.

That stopped the conversation. The boy got my ticket and handed me the torn stub as if I'd just lectured him on the merits of good diet over bad complexion.

Inside, the harsh outdoor lights were up. I had come in between shows.

Not surprisingly, there were few cars there. My young friend had been

doing right by himself.

Most of the cars were in the middle of the lot, separated from their neighbors by as wide a margin as possible. Hardly anyone was parked up front, near the screen. I went in the opposite direction, pulled into the very last row at the end, and shut the lights and engine off. Another beer found its way into my hand as I looked around me. The nearest car was at least twenty yards away. The van was nearly isolated. Good.

The drive-in was an old, dying place, its asphalt cracked and buckling. The only illumination came from three lamps strung up above a fading white screen. The small projection booth and snack bar looked like a grimy pillbox. When I hung a speaker on my window, I noticed that its companion had been torn from the pole, leaving only a frayed, dangling cord.

A gust of wind rocked the van. I sighed and turned up the stereo. Another atmosphere was beginning to seep into my still-tender nerves the weight of the night, the chill of the wind. The music from the radio snapped at me like a loyal mechanical dog, trying to drive my restlessness away.

I cursed and took a deep drink of beer. The lights suddenly faded over the screen. Something scratchy whispered out of the speaker.

A cartoon came on.

An hour later, when I had almost finished the six-pack, it began to drizzle. I turned on the wipers until it stopped. It was cold inside the van, but the alcohol nuzzled with its false warmth. I hadn't paid much attention to the film. It was German, an old, grainy, dubbed western from the late sixties.

I rolled down the window and threw out an empty. The wind kicked it, clattered it across the undulating humps of the lot, rolling it up, down, away, toward the high wooden wall spotted with flaking green paint that surrounded that theater. When it bounced into the shadows cast by the wall, I lost interest. I picked up the final beer.

And I froze. Something had flickered in the corner of my eye. Something white. I turned around, strained to see. A faint patch of the whiteness was moving in the wall's deepest shadows. It grew larger.

Then Carol stepped out of the shadows and into the dim light.

She was still beautiful, still young, a tall, slender woman just this side of twenty. Her clothes were different, though; this time she was wearing a creamy Irish-knit sweater and dark designer jeans. Always in style, I thought inanely. Her hair was long and blonde and sparkling, her oval face punctuated by those great wide lunar eyes.

She looked toward the van and saw me watching her. Taking a hesitant step forward, she smiled.

I hated her, then. The day-long tension that had been pulling, pulling, snapped and boiled over into pure naked loathing. I yanked at the door handle, sprang to the ground. My hand, still holding the unopened beer can, was trembling violently.

Carol took another step. I threw the can at her. It went wide, striking the wooden wall with a hollow *chunk*.

"Go away!" I yelled. "God damn it, leave me alone!"

We were close, close enough to read the expressions on each other's face. She seemed puzzled at first; then her gaze bored directly into my filthy, needy heart. She drew closer, finally stopping less than a yard away, the light from the screen highlighting her right profile. Darkness swallowed the rest of her face.

"Honey," she said hesitantly. "What's wrong?"

I groaned.

She closed the remaining distance between us and laid a hand on my cheek. "Honey, what is it?"

Her hand was solid, warm. Her fingertips caressed my skin, stroking away the hatred, soothing away the fear until I reached out, grabbed her hand with my own, and pulled her toward me. Carol came willingly, eagerly, her arms folding around my waist.

"Oh, Christ," I muttered. I hugged her, feeling the press of cloth, the warmth of body beneath. All that misery from the past year suddenly wrenched up into my throat. I cried uncontrollably, wracked and sobbing, the kind of crying where your eyes run and your nose runs and the saliva drips unheeded from your open, quivering mouth. All the while Carol held me, stroked my hair, crooned softly as I buried my face in her shoulder and brokenly choked out her name over and over again.

At last the tide of grief crested, broke, retreated. I managed to somehow pull away from her. Wiping my eyes. Carol's hair was matted against the side of her throat. She laughed and ran a hand through it.

Then she noticed my face. The pain. The hunger. Very slowly, Carol's hands ran down my forearms until they rested on my wrists. She gripped them tightly.

"Let's go back inside the car," she whispered.

Gently she tugged me toward the still-open door. I resisted, but I was weak with fear, weak with longing. She let go and entered the van first, squirmed around the steering wheel, and moved into the back.

Up on the screen an olive-skinned cowboy with startling blue eyes fell off his horse. I swallowed, wiped my nose on the back of my sleeve, and followed her in.

Carol was lying on the dirty polyfoam pad that serves as the van's bed. She'd taken her sweater off. A faint glimmer of light shone through the louvered glass windows and fell palely on her breasts, breasts that trembled slightly as she reached for me. Her hands touched my groin. Moved. She whispered my name.

I should have run, then. I should have leapt from the van and dashed from the theater, run or hitchhiked all the way to the ocean before throwing myself in.

But I didn't. I fell on the pad and drowned in her.

It wasn't sex, though that was part of it. It was mostly a shedding of pain and loneliness, and unfathomable sharing of love—dear God, so very, very much love. It was an impossible fusion, an intimate blending, and when we finally came apart the union was still there, bottomless, complete.

She lay with her naked hip against me, her hands lazily caressing the small of my back. For a long, long while we were simply content to be, cupped in a silence too comfortable for words. Finally she murmured something against my chest.

"What?" I said, shifting.

She moved her face until it was only inches from mine. Her eyes were languorous, satisfied, her breath warm against my lips. "I said, let's go home."

I bolted upright, grabbed her bare shoulders, almost knocked her off the pad. Under my fingers her skin was slick with perspiration. "Do you mean that?" I asked excitedly. "Do you?"

A wisp of concern drifted across her face, and sudden doubt assailed me. After all, this was something new. I tried to keep the urgency from my voice as I said, "Can you? I mean, is it possible?"

Her expression lightened. "Of course it's possible, you idiot." She rubbed my belly. "What's the matter? Don't you want to?"

In answer I leaned forward and kissed her—hard. The next moment I was slapping on my clothes and slipping into the driver's seat. I could hear Carol chuckling as she dressed.

I pulled out of the lane so quickly that I almost ripped the speaker pole out of the ground. Cursing, I shifted the engine into neutral, cranked down the window, and threw the speaker into the darkness. Carol came forward and plumped into the passenger's seat, giggling now.

"In a hurry?" She patted my thigh.

I didn't answer. There was a single, desperate image in my head. Carol and I. At home. Together.

I stamped on the accelerator, rushed up and down the tar-covered humps, almost bottomed out the van. Just before we reached the ticket booth I snapped on the lights. The pimply-faced kid in the yellow raincoat leaned out of the booth and saw the two of us as we screamed past him. I caught a last glimpse of the boy as we turned onto the frontage road. He gave us the finger.

Heater on, we sped onto the freeway, the interior of the van growing sultry. The greenish glow spilling from the dashboard lights softened Carol's features, caressing the full, sensuous mouth, the thin straight nose, the thick hair swept back from her forehead in twin foaming waves. Her head was propped against the cold window, her eyes heavy-lidded. She was humming softly to herself, the formless song of a child singing away the dark.

A horn sounded angrily. I'd been staring too long at her and had drifted toward another lane, almost tapping a small yellow Volks. It gave another bleat and surged ahead as I turned my eyes back to the road.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Carol lean forward. She pulled one of my hands off the wheel and squeezed it with both her own. Her grip was dry and tight.

"I've missed you, honey," she said softly.

A small, painful lump stuck in my throat. "Carol . . . "

"Shhh," she said. "It's all right now. Aren't we going home?"

"Yes," I told her, "yes. We are."

"And aren't we together?"

"Yes."

Which was, of course when it happened.

There was a loud, sudden pop. It sounded like a firecracker or a backfire, but backfires don't happen in the front seat. It's a gunshot, I told myself. Then I felt Carol's touch grow cold. I turned my head, half knowing what I would see.

I was wrong. It was worse than I'd imagined, worse than last year's knifing or the bludgeoning the year before that. Worse than any of them.

A small hole had opened in the passenger window, a hole through which the wind shrieked and from which a multitude of tiny cracks radiated outward through the glass. And Carol—

I couldn't help it. I screamed.

Half of her head was gone. It was as if some jagged, arbitrary line had been diagonally slashed across her face, beginning at the lower left jawbone and zigzagging upward to her right temple. Everything above that line had been erased, had simply ceased to exist. A great gout of blood and bone was splashed across the windshield. I could see her brains.

I tried to drop my hand, but Carol's grip was impossibly strong, like iron. Still screaming, I stamped on the brakes. We went into a wild skid, fishtailing in a 180-degree arc. The dash lights shone brightly on her remaining eyeball as it swiveled in its socket to look right at me. What was left of her mouth dropped open; I could see her moving, shredded tongue.

"Darling," she slurred, in a tone of deepest sympathy. "What's wrong?"

And she softly stroked my captive hand.

I went a little crazy. I kicked at the brakes, shrieking at the top of my lungs. Carol was flung violently away from me, hit hard against the door. The impact snapped it open, and she flipped out and disappeared into the blackness. Dimly I heard the sound of another horn, another set of squealing brakes, and a thud. Then the van's insane momentum slammed the door shut. A moment later the motor died, and with a bone-jarring jerk I came to a halt.

The van was pointing in the wrong direction, facing the oncoming traffic. But I'd been lucky. I'd skidded in a half-circle, stalling the engine and somehow slapping the wheels on the driver's side up against the low concrete ridge bordering the shoulder of the road. It was the ridge that had stopped me from flipping over.

I should have been panicked, hysterical, but I wasn't. If anything, I felt light-headed, relieved, even a little giddy. The nervousness was gone—

completely.

It's always like that.

A dark four-door sedan pulled off the road in front of me. I winced as its headlights shone into my eyes. A moment later the driver notched them down to a dull glow and flung open his door. I watched him get out. He was a bald, muscular man, dressed in a cheap three-piece suit. Even in the glare of my lights, his face was whiter than it should have been. He looked terrified.

I climbed out of the van and met him halfway. He looked as if he were going to be sick.

"Jesus, mister!" he babbled. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. He didn't seem to notice.

"Jesus!" he said again. "I hit her! Honest to God, I didn't even see her until it was too late! One minute I'm thinking about getting home and the next minute the door opens up and she flies into my hood and her face, mister, God in heaven, her face-!"

I turned around, glanced at the van. The windshield in front of the passenger's seat was clean and unsoiled.

I turned back to the other man. His face was flushed, and he'd been waving his arms. Somewhere off to the side of the road, in the night-shrouded field that paralleled the freeway, a cricket chirped.

"It's all right," I said.

"What?" His perspiration glittered in the headlights. "We've got to find her! She's back there somewhere, lying on the road!"

My vision was misting over, softening his features and the hard silhouette of his car. I snickered at the sight of his bald head; it was sweating too. After all this time, the beer had finally hit. That's probably why I tried to explain. Usually I don't. But I felt sorry for him. Another innocent, touched by my sin.

"No," I told him. "She's not."

"Huh?" He blinked.

"My wife's not there," I repeated. "She's in a Mexican cemetery, outside Cabos San Lucas. We were honeymooning, you see. We had a fight. I guess I was drinking too much. I guess I hit her, too."

I paused, waiting, while a big eighteen-wheel rig thundered by. When I could talk without shouting I said, "She ran away. Where, I don't know. The next morning the police called. They'd found her in a ditch. Someone had choked her to death. Before that she'd been raped."

The man took a sudden backward step.

"So don't blame yourself," I reassured him. "Don't you see? It's not your fault. It's mine. She knows that. Besides," I added, "in a little while you won't even remember this. Any of it."

That was true. There had been other witnesses in the past, and other participants. But only I remember; only I can recall.

The bald man's expression had changed. His eyes were wider, and a new fear shone from them. He hunched up his shoulders as if he was afraid I was going to hit him. "Look, mister," he said unsteadily, "I don't know what you're talking about. All I know is that there's a lady back there, hurting real bad. Are you coming?"

I shook my head.

"All right," he said. "Okay." Suddenly he wheeled and bolted, ran back down the road. Just before the night absorbed him, he turned his head and yelled, "But I'm bringing back the cops!"

I listened to the sound of his clattering heels until I couldn't hear them anymore. By the time he'd run to the roadside emergency phone he was going to be feeling pretty stupid; the only thoughts in his mind would be, What am I doing here, and why am I not going home?

What the hell. I lit a cigarette and walked back to the van.

The remaining bullet hole in the passenger window mocked me. Another souvenir. As I got in and turned on the engine, I thought of this: Was there, even now, someone out there in that field? Someone slipping a rifle into its case or a pistol into a waistband, someone whose mind was frozen with horror or mad with exultation?

Maybe. And then again, maybe not.

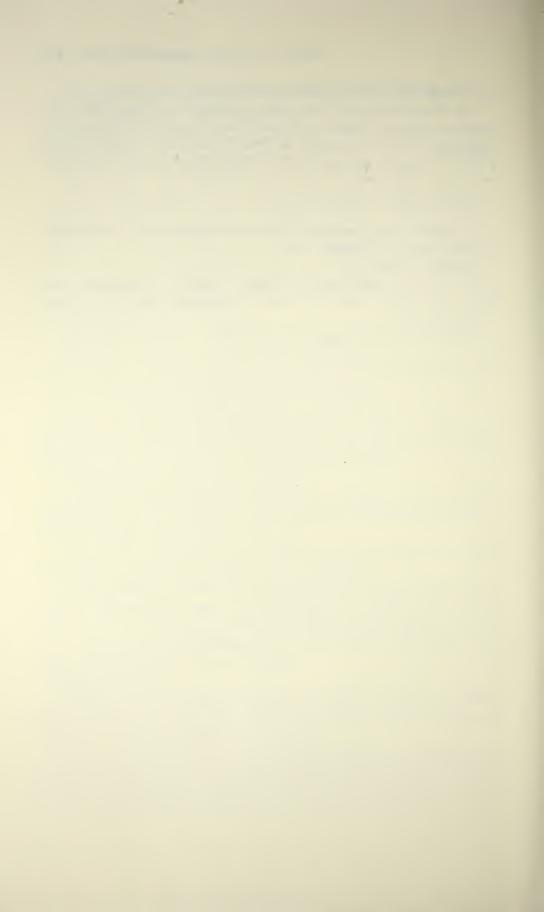
Does it matter?

Getting the van turned around in that traffic was tricky, but I managed. On the way home, it began to rain.

It rained all that night.

This morning, when I woke up, I had a hangover—a small one. A little killer. So I walked down to the corner and bought a bottle of aspirin and another six-pack.

Before I left, I picked up another calendar.



# Red Christmas

### David S. Garnett

Born in Liverpool in 1947, David S. Garnett currently lives in West Sussex. He has had six science fiction books published under his name, the first of which, Mirror in the Sky, he wrote when he was nineteen. Other science fiction books are Time in Eclipse, The Starseekers, The Forgotten Dimension, Phantom Universe, and Cosmic Carousel. Under several other names he has written numerous other types of books, including the novelization of The Hills Have Eyes: Part Two, while even more pseudonyms have disguised his identity as the author of many short stories and articles and features in magazines whose pages are mostly filled with unclad ladies. "Red Christmas," first published in the holiday issue of one such magazine, Mayfair, appeared under the byline David Almandine. Garnett will have his joke.

IT WAS ONLY eight o'clock, but already it was freezing. Richard Franks drove home carefully, and not until he had stopped his car in the driveway did he really believe it. For the first time in over a week he was home before midnight.

He tried the door with his key, then remembered he still had to ring the bell because his wife had left the bolt on. He heard her open the living room door, and saw the hall light come on.

"It's only me, Sue," he called.

"You're home early," she said, letting him in.

"You call this early?" he said, his lips brushing hers. He bolted and chained the door, then followed his wife down the hall and into the kitchen.

"Coffee?"

"Please."

"Dinner'll be ready soon. It hasn't had much time to get cold."

"Fine," said Richard. He put his bulging briefcase on the kitchen table. "I'll just put the car away. If I don't do it now, I won't want to later." He unbolted the back door.

"Maybe we'll have a white Christmas," said Susan, shivering as her husband let the cold air in.

"We might. But there's not much time left."

He went outside while Susan filled the kettle.

It was the night before Christmas Eve.

"Any progress?" Susan asked as she put his plate on the table.

Richard shook his head, and started eating.

"It would be nice if you could solve it before Christmas, then perhaps we'll have you home all day."

"I've told you I'll try my best to make it," said Richard between mouthfuls. "But if anything happens, I've got to be there. You know that. We can't expect the murderer to stop just because it's Christmas."

"There hasn't been one today?"

"No." Richard almost added: not yet. A murder every night for the past eight days, and the police had got nowhere with it. The papers called it a scandal, and the city lived in fear.

"Perhaps there won't be any more. He might stop."

"Stopping isn't good enough. We have to get him. A maniac's on the loose, and we're running around in circles. All leave's been canceled; mobile patrols have trebled. And still it goes on."

"You'll get him, dear," said Susan. "I know you will."

Richard knew it too. However long it took, no matter what it cost, this was one case he had to clear up. But he wondered how many more victims the madman would claim before he was trapped.

Richard was finishing his main course. Susan was pouring custard on the apple pie. Then the phone rang.

He was on his feet at once. "Franks," he said into the receiver. "Yes. Where? Jesus! Like the others? Yes, I'll be there in five minutes." He replaced the phone.

"Another?" said Susan, and he nodded.

"Haven't you time to eat this?"

"Keep it warm," Richard told her, but he knew that in a few minutes he'd have completely lost his appetite. He'd seen many murder victims during his career, but none had affected him like these. Perhaps, he reflected, I'm getting too old for this sort of thing; too conscious of my own mortality.

He put on his coat and scarf, hat and gloves. "I shouldn't be more than a couple of hours. There's nothing I can do there, but I've got to make an appearance." He opened the door, and gave her the same warning he

had for the past week. "Bolt the door. And don't open it to anyone but me. Anyone."

"Yes, Richard," said Susan.

Richard went out into the cold, the front door closing behind him. He looked up into the black, star-filled sky as he began walking. There was no moon tonight, but his route was well lit.

What he hadn't told Susan was that the murdered woman had lived only a quarter of a mile away, in a small house on one of the streets he'd come along only twenty minutes ago. It hadn't seemed worth getting his car out of the garage again. If he had to go to headquarters, he'd get a lift back in a patrol car. But Susan had probably noticed he was on foot, and she'd guess he wasn't going far. It couldn't be helped, he was on his way now.

As he walked, he tried to remember if he'd noticed anything unusual as he'd come along West Road. A handful of cars, a butcher's van delivering turkeys, a police car, two or three people walking, a bunch of kids carol singing. In none of the other cases had any of the neighbors seen or heard anything out of the ordinary, and Richard expected it would be the same here.

He arrived at the house at the same time as the ambulance. He pushed his way through the score of people standing and staring, and was dazzled by the flashbulb as a press photographer stepped out in front of him. He went around the man, ignoring the questions of the reporter who suddenly appeared by his side. Finally he got to the door, and a uniformed officer standing outside opened it for him.

The first thing Richard did was check the door. There were two solid bolts, a lock and a safety chain. One of the bolts, and the chain, were obviously new. But the chain was hanging down. It had been opened from inside. As with all the other victims, this woman had opened the door, and welcomed death.

Her body was in the front room, next to the overturned Christmas tree. The trail of blood led into the room from the hall. She'd managed to crawl three or four yards before finally collapsing—and she'd been stabbed every inch of the way. It was like all the others.

Richard only needed to look for a second. It was easy to tear his eyes away from the corpse, but his nose couldn't block the sickly-sweet scent of the blood. He tasted his meal in the back of his throat, and wished he hadn't eaten it.

"Hello, Mal," he said to the man standing by the fireplace, his cigarette dripping ash onto the carpet.

"Looks like you didn't get an early night after all," said Malcolm Kegan.

He inclined his head toward the body, surrounded by the men taking photographs, and measuring and testing. "Same as usual. She let the killer in. Back door and windows still secure. Wasn't robbed or sexually assaulted. The place smashed up a little."

"How long ago?"

"No more than an hour. That's when her husband went on the night-shift. A car picked him up. He's in the kitchen at the back. Want to see him?"

"Later," said Richard. "I came by this way half an hour ago. There was a butcher's van on the other side, fifty yards down. Better check it. Ask the neighbors, usual thing."

"The man next door found her," said Mal. "He came to bring a Christmas card that had been delivered wrongly. When he didn't get a reply, he looked through the window, and saw her."

"What's her name?"

"Campbell. Jane Campbell. She teaches part time at the school down the road."

"Check on the postman," said Richard.

"As always."

"Yes. As always."

The postman was the only person they'd been able to think of for whom people would open their doors under present circumstances. At this time of year, everyone got deliveries. Other people who went from house to house, such as electricity meter readers, usually carried identification. And they kept daylight hours, and didn't have to work through into the evening. But even they would be checked and re-checked.

Richard surveyed the room, trying to imagine how it had been as the murderer left: the hacked corpse and the blood, the toppled tree, the smashed ornaments, the litter on the floor—tinsel, wrappers, scattered nuts, the empty lemonade bottle, the full bottle of scotch beneath the fallen string of Christmas cards.

What kind of ghoul could be responsible for such an atrocity?

It didn't make sense. For Richard Franks every crime had to have a motive of some sort. Where murder was concerned, the reason could be anything from anger to robbery. It could be committed in the heat of the moment, or meticulously planned. But something like this? The fact that it went on and on, that each night there had been another death, made it seem even harder to comprehend.

Who would stab a forty-year-old woman a hundred times, then pull down the decorations, and leave? It had to be someone Mrs. Campbell knew or trusted, or else she wouldn't have let him in.

Him? The killer could equally have been a woman. But murders like this weren't usually the crime of a woman. Yet how many series of murders such as these had there ever been? Very few, Richard knew.

Or there might have been more than one murderer. Another theory was that the different killings had been committed by different people—as if murder was an infectious disease. Richard didn't think much of this notion, but he couldn't discard it. Any idea, however crazy, had to be examined.

Yet the fact remained that all the victims had opened their doors, and those with safety chains had undone them. Three men were included among those murdered. Two of them had been in their forties, and might have been expected to put up some resistance. The other was a retired dentist, slain with his elderly wife in the only double killing on the murderer's score card.

Richard went looking for the woman's husband, but he found himself in the kitchen. The fridge door was open, and there was an empty bottle of milk lying on the mat. Next to it were several pieces of broken glass.

Turning, Richard went to talk to Mr. Campbell. And, as ever, he wondered what he could possibly say.

Richard was home even earlier the next night. He'd got past the stage of pretending to do something even when there was nothing he could do. It was best if he stayed at home tonight—or at least until the inevitable phone call—because he probably wouldn't get much time at home tomorrow. How many years was it since he'd been here for Christmas dinner?

"I'm glad you're here," said Susan. "I feel much safer."

"Don't be silly. Everyone's perfectly safe so long as they keep the door locked. Christ knows how many times we've told them. People are stupid. They simply ask for it."

"You shouldn't talk like that."

"Well, it's true. We can have a car anywhere in town within ninety seconds of a phone call."

"Not everyone has a phone," Susan reminded him.

"All but two of those murdered did."

"You won't have to go out again, will you? Even if there is another one, you said yourself there's nothing you personally can do."

"There doesn't seem anything anyone can do," said Richard, "But that doesn't mean we can stop trying. Yet it does seem that once he's done one, he goes home to bed. So everyone's safe after that."

"That's been the pattern so far, but what—" Richard cut her off. "Don't

say any more. Let's have a bit of the Christmas spirit. How about a vodka and lime?"

"Yes please. But only a small one, or you'll never get your dinner."
Richard poured himself a whisky, then handed his wife her vodka. He raised his glass. "Here's to crime."

"That's not very funny anymore."

Richard shrugged and started drinking. "You've made a nice job of the tree," he said.

"It's been like that for days if you'd noticed," his wife called as she went into the kitchen.

Franks didn't know why she bothered. There were just the two of them now. Colin would be bringing his wife and one-year-old son tomorrow, but Anne and her husband lived too far away to come.

Richard felt he had every reason to be pleased with the way they'd brought up their family. Both their son and daughter had been to university, and had settled into good jobs before marrying. But he didn't envy them the task of bringing up children in this undisciplined decade.

It did kids good to go without. When he'd been a boy, he'd had nothing, now children wanted everything—and usually got it. When he'd gone to buy something for his grandson, Raymond, he had been amazed at the stuff on sale.

All those toy guns and weapons and Junior Mugger sets. It was no wonder kids turned into juvenile delinquents. Richard blamed television too. It simply wasn't proper to allow developing minds to watch some of those programs. They'd grow up with completely wrong ideas about society and law, about death and violence. They'd have no sense of right or wrong.

But Richard knew his views weren't held by the majority, and he had learned to keep quiet. Everyone was entitled to their own opinion. Yet it was a pity that everyone had the wrong opinion. If it wasn't safe to walk the streets tonight, he hated to think how it would be in ten or twenty years.

Richard refilled his tumbler, and stood looking at the tree. It was about the same size as the one in that woman's house, Mrs. Campbell. Decorated in the same way, with tinsel and silver balls and colored bulbs and metal stars and chocolate novelties. He smiled. Who did Susan think would eat those? Timothy was only eleven months old. He glanced toward the hatch, then unhooked a chocolate pocket watch, stabbing himself with green pine needles. He pried off the silver foil, and bit the chocolate in two. As he went to drop the wrapper in the bin, it fell out of his hand.

He looked at it on the floor, trying to remember why it seemed so familiar. Then he remembered the foil wrappers in the murder house last night. They too must have come from a Christmas tree. The killer had eaten them. Could it be that he'd pulled the tree over to get at them?

Sitting down, the glass in his hand forgotten, Richard stared at the tree, his mind going back to the previous night. The chocolate wrappers. The empty lemonade bottle. The empty milk bottle. Perhaps the killer was mentally retarded. Or teetotal. He smiled to himself for a moment, then it was gone.

Suddenly it came to him. It was so simple. So simple yet so unbelievable.

He got up and walked to the telephone. As he began to dial, he heard voices start to sing outside the front door.

Once in Royal David's city . . .

And the doorbell rang. Richard hardly noticed the bell or the singing. He'd somehow dialed the wrong number, and had to start again.

He saw Susan go past him into the hall, subconsciously knowing that she was going to peep through the window to see who was at the door. A few seconds later, he got through.

"Yes, Rich?" said Malcolm Kegan.

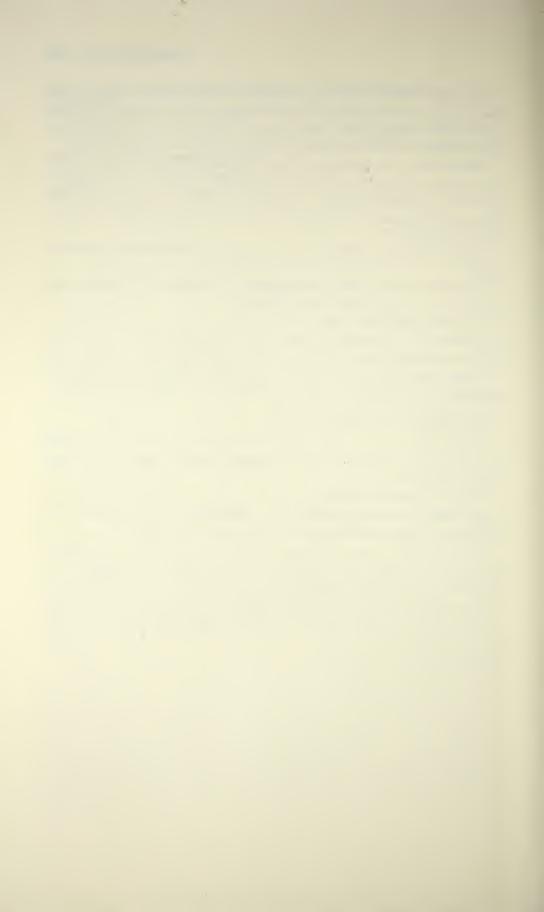
Richard didn't answer. He dropped the phone, and ran into the hall. Susan had drawn the bolt, and undone the chain, and now she was turning the latch.

"Susan!" he yelled. "No!"

His wife turned and looked at him, "But they're only children," she said, beginning to open her purse to give them something.

Then the door was pushed open, Susan knocked aside, and silently they rushed in. There were about ten of them, aged seven or eight. Their eyes were bright, their cheeks rosy, and the knives they pulled out of their pockets, and held in their woolly-gloved hands, were very sharp.

Susan backed away to stand next to Richard as the deadly choir moved swiftly toward them. As the last one closed the door, Richard noticed that it had started to snow.



# Too Far Behind Gardina

## Steve Sneyd

Steve Sneyd was born in 1941 in Maidenhead, Berkshire, and now lives in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire—where Robin Hood is said to have been buried. Presently he is employed as a copy-writer for a regional evening newspaper. Sneyd's interests include visiting castles, pubs, walking, photography, and reading crime and historical books. Sneyd is primarily a poet, whose work has appeared extensively in small press publications throughout the world. His fiction has been published in Whispers, Dark Dreams, and other little magazines, in addition to book appearances in Whispers III and in The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series VIII. Sneyd's work has also appeared in a dozen or more booklets—among them: Four Minute Island, The Rex Quondam File, Star For Head And Feet, and The Pleasing Creatures. "Too Far Behind Gradina" also was first published as a separate booklet by SF Spectrum Publications Ltd. The novella is an unnerving tour de force that only a gifted poet could have accomplished. It is Sneyd's most ambitious work, and it is my privilege to be able to present it to the wider audience it deserves.

#### PROLOGUE:

the master speaks in the castle . . .

i give moths a light everlasting as fate against which to beat and blast and burn themselves in an intolerable excess of unanswered love

i give the wasps too what they wish a place a face against which to crash the scent that drives them mad rotting mankind to ape for them a summer's end in which to end in sting-desperate with frustration of the sexy senses of nearing dying and

so little time to waste

the peasant torn between God's warning & the hand of communist man promising car TV a dishwasher
I give a third alternative

against which the other two can unite & fight & reknit his shriveled personality stretched thin between this year and 1550

lizards their wish to become inconspicuous i give no tail i leave them to show them up blocking the bright ness of the day when all they wish thick with self-shame and sense of insufficiency is to drop out of sight and live on indivisibly invisible among great tangled roots

& to you you foolish new people so faithless you have become incredibly more credulous than maddest bigot or fanatic of these blackcloaked churches who slaver upon the agony the Crucified appears to demonstrate, you I will give just what you wish

### name it and I

will interpret the dish you seek as does a master chef to make from cheap ingredients a lake of fire a cake whose icing is the farthest stars and bake your half-formed thoughts to slake the agony you dare not speak the longing deep as woman's gate to suffer that is all your fate

which otherwise like amateurs
you practice in badly-driven cars
or with a cigarette or beers
shoved down your throat the nearest you dare go

towards taking

poison to annoy

a universe that will not love you.

"HAVE A NICE holiday, dear?"—pouring tea with the smooth automatic motions of a Longbridge assembly-line worker as she spoke.

It was the day after getting home, and Mariella still dazed by going and by coming back, and her mother tranquilly warm and ripe to bursting with a fortnight's pent-up gossip, longing to get the ritual inquiry about their holiday over with so she could launch guiltless and unchecked into her own preoccupations with neighbors' petty spites and sillinesses and the latest calls on people who'd got above themselves on the street by the friendly neighborhood bailiff...

And rather than scream, or try to explain to someone who as long as she could remember wished only to know that her own brood were tidy and clean and hard-working so she could out-face any gossip, and never ever wanted to look below the smoothness of the skin, Mariella merely said, "Yes, fine."

"And the hotel?"

"Really nice."

"And the children?"

"They loved it—we're just waiting for the photographs back. How have you been?"

And the subject was safely forgotten for the moment at least, buried in a safe avalanche of brightly catty trivia. "For which relief great thanks," thought Mariella—and then remembered the quote was one of her husband's favorites, and mentally cursed again how he maggoted her brain.

And still none of it all made any real pattern of sense or logic anyhow. Colin always said she was scatterbrained, yet when he wasn't there to make her every word seem foolish by interruption or pitying "ignore the little woman, she's only a dumb blonde anyhow" smile, she could think and talk as clearly at least as most, and certainly more than most of those girls she'd been to school with: but this—it was beyond her.

A fortnight's holiday: so long looked forward to, so planned for even to minutiae of suntan oils and seasick pills and drawing books to quiet the children, towels in case the hotel ones were too harsh, and every other damn fool thing enjoyed in the preparations, just because it was, even the relentless ticking off of lists of must-take necessities, part of preparations for a change, an escape.

And then, when they'd got there, the whole fortnight, up to the very last day anyway, had been so dreadfully sane at "their" hotel in "their" resort, her family unchanged and her escape each day postponed, she might as well have stayed at home—as if all those months' anticipation of a change as unimaginably great as leaving school had once seemed, full of dreams and possibilities, was just one more proof after all that life always has you by the short and curlies and never more so than when you're fool enough to look forward to something new too much.

As for the last day before the return to good old Helmebridge where life had began and doubtless had already ended, well that day she could neither discuss with anyone nor really with herself: nightmare was the only word she could think of, desperately trying to cocoon it away in unreality like a late night, too frightening TV play you laugh off the next day: and never never would she even begin to admit to herself, she thought, that something like that had really been what she had longed for all along.

And watching her mother's hands, still busy shifting cakes and plates and teapot in parody of genteel hospitality as if it were a Lord Lieutenant she entertained, not her daughter, the occasion rather than the person mattering most as trigger for the ritual, Mariella, letting the bright stream of chatter flow over her unheard save with enough unconscious understanding to answer "Yes" or "Fancy" a nibbling leer at the edge of thought, go back over that last day in Gradina as their package holiday on "the Adriatic coast, pearl of the Mediterranean's unspoiled holiday playgrounds," neared its predestined end.

All holiday Colin had been busy as a bee putting himself across as Mr. Knowitall, insisting at the top of crow-harsh voice on telling all the fellow passengers every last detail of history, geography, place of note, in this place or that they went to on excursions, his facts all culled from an

extensive guidebook bought the first day, not for any pleasure of knowledge, she was sure, but merely to be sure of always being one up, the man "who knew what's what," even to correcting guides, insisting on trying to bargain down the price of the boat already hired by the courier to take them to the Roman temple in a grotto across the lake, even insisting on some obscure wine which of course the hotel didn't have although the guidebook said it came from nearby: and causing a scene till the manager in person swore that vineyard destroyed by the war, no wine still made—and everything had been like that, day after day . . . Colin shouting the kids down every time the least spontaneous shout of joy or excitement at some new sight had interrupted one of his set-piece lectures at what they should be looking at, as in an old donkey running mad in a field while a bewildered little boy shrieked after it helplessly couldn't, and wasn't bound to be, ten times as exciting to an eight and a ten year old as some pile of shapeless Turkish stones?

Maddening, doubtless, the middle-aged fellow passengers, who for some reason known only to himself he had set out to impress, yet could not forbear to show contempt loudly toward every time they preferred shops or a cafe to endless meticulous examination of every sight the

guidebook listed that they came near.

And, whenever Mariella asked him to look after the kids for an hour or so, while she had a headache (her period, that, just like her luck, came right in the middle of the holiday and left her pained, listless, longing only to crawl into a hole and hide for days), all he could say was "Can't you manage them anymore, then?", cool superiority and telltale irritation showing in frown wrinkles deepening, in a combination that made her ready to shriek with frustration.

The morning of the last day came, and she at last rebelled. There hadn't been, she knew as clear as she knew she was awake as the light dancing off harbor water walked across the shadowed ceiling, and Colin snored still (something he always swore he never did), one whole hour save in sleep she'd really had to herself—or had chance to be herself—all through the holiday, holiday so-called that was, when except for cooking she had every other bit of the running round after husband and children that made up time at home too, even the hours they were away at work or school taken up with starting meals ready, mending clothes, doing Colin's endless errands to bank, library, post office, building society, that he would not do himself yet was ever ready to instruct her how to carry out as if to a child, "Say this to the TV people, say that to the electricity people," never-ending instruction. And just this one day had to be hers, saved out of all the anticipation, out of all this year at least.

Not that she rebelled directly: she could not have faced Colin's sulks, his attempts to foist the kids on her and escape himself, feeling a bigger man still with no children around to remind him he was not as young as he was, or even the children asking, "Why aren't you going with us today, Mum?", treating her as a possession necessarily kept in sight all the time lest it stray or be nicked, like the dog or train set or the dolls at home.

No: she deliberately toyed with her breakfast, finishing neither bread and apricot jam nor coffee, ignoring the children, leaning at least head in hand till reluctantly, following necessary pattern gracelessly like a wild animal posing as laboratory specimen to escape detection, Colin asked, "What's up?"

"Sorry, Colin, I don't feel so well. I've got a sick headache, maybe that wine last night."

"You'd better go back to bed, take an aspirin and lie down." Reluctant the concession: obviously he expected her to say "I'll be all right."

But she took his words at face value, "Yes, if you don't mind I think that'd be better. You wouldn't mind taking the kids to the Falls and the Pirate Town with the others, would you? I'm sure they'll be good." A perfect trap: Colin did try saying, "Don't you want me to stay and look after you?" but she insisted she didn't want them to miss a treat so long looked forward to, and knowing how many pages in the guidebook there were about both places, so many nuggets for Colin to bring out and show his cleverness, she was sure this impulse would override his unwillingness to be stuck with the kids, particularly when she casually motioned the kids to say "good morning" to the coach-driver, the one who with nine kids of his own was immune, even liked children, and so reminded Colin by this hint that after all the driver'd probably be willing to let their two stick with him most of the day, relieving Colin.

So, at last, at last, leaving abruptly at the end, his unwillingness to waste sympathy on anyone but himself so rope-strong he was obviously maddened by having to offer comfort to Mariella's well-timed groans, Colin was off into the big Routemaster coach, busy at one and the same time grabbing a seat good for photography and issuing unwanted advice to everybody else, fellow passengers too far past youth or too polite to tell him to piss off: and the kids, too, aboard, waving, perched on the engine by the driver's casually-given leave, both looking so sweet she almost regretted not keeping them at least with her for the day: too late, they were gone, the dust puffing up from the cracked dry road round the headland from the hotel into the town: and a few minutes later, as she lingered over the coffee, enjoyable now with her jailor gone, the coach reappeared across the bay, climbing the headland road through pines to

swing out of sight, she guiltily an instant imagining Colin could somehow see across all that distance and spot her beginning to dare to relax and enjoy herself.

And the coach was gone: only the headland, and the little boats, and, far above, the great half-seen fortress that no matter how clear the day had never really been sharply visible, that in Colin's book had been a last-ditch hold against Romans, Venetians and Turks alike, loomed.

She did not wait to try to see the coach's dust reappear far off where the coast-road looped again along the inland sea, or bay it was really, but finished her coffee, though no waiters hovered. They never seemed to here—and climbed back to the room to collect her things and try to decide which of the many treats she could have today she wanted to do first, temporarily paralyzed from decision as when in a sale of clothes too many things attracted her till she dare not try to decide, each choice so fraught with possibilities to make a fool of herself—and whichever choice she didn't take doubtless the one that would have made her unimaginably happy.

And lay a few minutes on the bed, trapped by inertia while these

precious minutes moved by. A cigarette: that'd help her think.

A whole day before her: they wouldn't be back till seven at the earliest, the courier'd said; and she could blissfully do nothing, lying on one of the concrete slabs set like islands among the rocks of the beach, each more inviting than the next. Or walk past the campsite where perhaps if she were alone one of the bronzed young men who'd doubtless been here all summer would revive her spirits by whistling, out through the groves of olives where no one seemed to bother with the fruit and each tree sat in its own man-high wall of stones laboriously picked like Cyclops' monument, so the book said, over years to make clear patches of soil for the tree's growing: to end at the lighthouse with its lace-shimmer of tiny fish about the water at its foot.

She could perhaps sit on the hotel terrace and order wine—and drink it without having to listen to Colin telling her at every sip what it ought to taste like and what she should watch for in the way of impudence or subtlety or raw inferiority to Reisling, as if she didn't know damn well he got all his knowhow out of the Observer Color Supplement.

The smoke from her cigarette curled against curtain. A sound of movement down the corridor: the maid on her way, doubtless—she'd have to move to let the woman get at bed and room. That was the one thing that she hated about the holiday that even Colin being different wouldn't have altered: having people fussing round, waiting on you at meals and doing the bed and things that you'd much rather do yourself

and get done with. Colin said she was silly, that these people'd be out of work if they didn't work in the hotels, and anyway they enjoyed it, and what did it being called a socialist country have to do with it, she was just old-fashioned and ignorant. End of conversation. Mariella a fool again . . . o forget him, damn it; he was out of the way for a day; try not to think of him once. As soon as she thought that, of course, she thought of him even more—like the last day of school holidays not all that long ago, really, Christ, eleven years if she thought about it, anyway, the more you tried not to think of school tomorrow, the more you thought of it.

Concentrate: get up, sensible rope-soled shoes on, she'd've loved some of those really silly embroidered peasantry ones but Colin said they weren't genuine Dalmatain work, just made to fool tourists and he wasn't being fooled, so no peasant shoes. Come on—forget the bastard . . . Oh, she put her hand to her mouth; as if lightning was going to hit her, or her mother from 2000 or whatever it was miles off. Talking about her husband that way.

Resolutely she refused to let her day be spoiled.

She put in her bag everything she'd need; whether she went on the beach, the flowered bra and pants she had on'd do as a bikini like they'd had to all holiday, Colin always so ready to say indifferently, "You look fine," and never ever bothering to buy her or even let her buy for herself, things new enough to let her convince her mirror she was still young and desirable, not even letting her go out to work and make some money to spend on herself, oh no that'd look as if he, a supermarket manager with a degree, couldn't support his family himself. Bastard: he'd only married her to have someone to look down on. He wanted her to get wrinkled and ugly so he'd be sure she wouldn't dare get away from him, she'd never find anyone else.

She clenched her fists, her teeth, "Forget him," she screeched at the mirror. The maid appeared, neat and cool-looking in black and white uniform, faint puzzled air on face, mop in hand all feathers like a stuffed museum duck in dusty Millby Hall back home, "Madam?"

"Never mind, it doesn't matter."

"Plizz?"

"I'm going out, here's the key," a huge wooden-handled thing with number on like a dungeon-ward. Smile from the maid, the situation explained.

Down through the hotel's dark corridors, past reception and the waiters, between meals watching "On the Buses" with subtitles and cackling like wicked children, out into the sun and the path round past the terrace to the beach . . .

Should she have gone to the village instead. She could for once have strolled round and really looked at things she was interested in, the children and the school and what was in the shops and which houses were being rebuilt and how were they furnished and the little hidden courtyard gardens glimpsed suddenly, without the endless embarrassment of Colin dragging you along and insisting at regular intervals on trying out his German, even she who knew the language not at all knew it was as garbled as Mr. Heath's French, stopping villagers and asking silly questions and then, if they misunderstood, didn't or wouldn't understand (and why should they in a place with thirty-nine dead listed on the Partisan Memorial in the Square, killed by the Germans; sentimental, he'd called her again, a fool, when she dared humbly mention that, "These people want money same as anywhere else, they don't care whose it is,") Colin mocked them as stupid, or insisted without a by-your-leave on photographing them, "Picturesque aren't they; that old woman there, like a Greek Fury" never "Like, truly, herself": everybody was that to him, some symbol, some ventriloquist's stage dummy or spear-carrier extra in the unending performance of his own so-significant life . . .

Ah, the lovely shade now, a tree that overhung the tiny fishermen's chapel at the point, no bigger than an English garage, and crammed, she'd seen Sunday when the door opened, though she daren't suggest going in to Colin lest he start photographing in the midst of the service, the inside crammed with wood-carved model boats, a couple of feet long each, hung like lamps from the roof, so she longed to have one to give her son, some sort of thank offering for miraculous escapes from the jaws of the sea, so the girl on the reception desk had said in her curiously elaborate textbook English. And unintentionally she relaxed there, cool in the shade yet eyes dazzled even so by the light's reflected darting off the water, where apparently equally entranced just one boat hung, in it a local still as silence, spear from his hand trailing the water, spear, more like a trident really, doubtless seeking mussels though how he'd catch them without movement she'd no idea.

She caught herself unconsciously searching her bag to make sure she'd the kids' stuff too, bandages and toys and towels and everything, and realized this one day at least she'd no need for more than what was there, her own towel, lovely and fluffy, not like the hotel one: Ornaja fruit-juice, the strange triangulate pack you just bit a corner off and let it trickle harsh-sweet into your mouth: sun oil, some weird local brand but it worked: and, sneaked out from its hiding place in the case, "Maigret in Montmartre": her first chance to read it without Colin mocking her crude

tastes, "a real TV addict's choice." Everything there—the beach only a few yards more. But somehow the heat held her paralyzed, or rather the heat she knew she'd enter the instant she left the tree's coolness.

The receptionist passed: smile and a wave, heading toward the village. Funny girl in some ways, Mariella had talked to her one evening when there'd been a sort of party for guests and staff alike on the terrace, and dancing to a scratched ancient collection of rock-n-roll records the Head Waiter cherished like the FA Cup, or the European Cup it'd be here, something called Hajuk Zadar they all followed it seemed, name painted on walls miles from anywhere the coach had passed, "Rubbish" Collin'd said they were, fancying himself on knowledge of football like everything else. Colin had had to burst in, gushing misplaced charm on the woman and spoiling the conversation, but Mariella had found out from her a strange mixture of attitudes. A graduate of Zagreb University her father the local Communist Party chief, mayor, something like that, and her contempt apparently equally fierce for the local fishermen, idle children she called them, superstitious.

Catholics, pretending to be poor because they wouldn't work, and for the city people she'd known, parasites, false sophisticates, bureaucrats: her father was a foolish idealist, his atheism a thin veneer, she said yet she stuck close to him, to the village. Why?

No guessing without sufficient evidence, Maigret would say, or would he. Speculating, her mind engrossed, Mariella moved automatically as a lizard dominates the hottest part of the beach, a sloping stretch of the concrete like an invalid bed. Oil rubbed smoothly on, an instant regretting Colin wasn't there to do her back: then stretch out, eyes shut, do the back first, head down on arms, snuggle into relaxation: and still her mind on the puzzle of the receptionist.

She knew why her own interest: Colin obviously fancied her. She knew the signs by now: the stares when he thought Mariella wasn't looking, the sly avoidance of the subject if she mentioned the woman, all the traces of his usual approach, one thing that at least did let her feel one up on him, to be able to see through him and at the same time to realize how shocked he'd be at how transparent his feeble attempts at luring women just by staring at them, feeling too superior doubtless to try to chat them up, really were. Probably thought he'd only to look at them and they'd fall at his feet, blinded by his glory.

Still she'd near as dammit done that once.

Of course she was only a young girl then, she'd excuse . . . Oh, forget it.

A slight shiver between her shoulders. Must be a slight breeze up. Open

eyes, read a few pages of Maigret. No good, couldn't concentrate, kept having to look back to see which was the victim.

Look out at the fisherman, a few yards farther on now, still in the same position, as if he, boat, spear and all had beamed like Captain Kirk: no sound of rowing, anyway: all unshaven he was, but they were real muscles under that scruffy sleeveless shirt. Saw her look, and waved, a minimal wave, like royalty to the crowd. Thought she was eyeing him up, did he . . . hot shame . . . eyes shut again . . . and a trance deep now coming on, as if she sank below the mirrored surface of the sea, down among the small fish . . . into coolness and silence . . . a shadow, a cavern, something biting at her . . . hot . . . Maigret's pipe, what was it doing there . . . hand grappling at her thigh . . . wide awake . . . embarrassed look round, had anyone seen her sudden electric movement . . . must've been a wasp or mosquito or something . . . hand moved round . . . no sign of a spot: daren't scratch properly, what would people think . . .

Not many on the beach now, anyway, with most of the English lot off on the coach . . .

Thoroughly wakened, wondering how she came to think she'd rolled over on her back: in her half-sleep perhaps.

A look far over at the ore ships: eyes scanned round and, just a few feet away along the beach, where she was sure they'd not been a minute or two before even, the Germans . . .

Both their eyes seemed to meet hers with a kindly pity as if to say "We knew you'd have to look at us. Don't worry, we don't mind being adored . . . don't be embarrassed child, it is permitted if you show proper respect." Superior bastards . . . or bastard and bitch, really . . . thought they owned the Earth, she could tell just looking at them.

Brother and sister the waiter said they were: and the Hotel had all the passports, so it was probably true.

The brother, such a suave cripple he was, beard and elegant movement like, had he been twenty years older, Svengali the Master to the life: the sister, hipbones swelling up like an old church's arches out of the yellow bikini so small you'd think the Germans suffered cloth rationing. Arrogant bastards—so self-consciously, no self-confidently beautiful, and probably, Mariella thought, pleased in this heat-daze she too could do the kind of psychological assessment of people Colin thought only he could do, it was their very arrogant aloofness that seemed to make each of the English coach party, and Colin most of all, try to make up to them, as if they were the only interesting people among all the sardine-tin identicals each British tourist thought all his or her fellow travelers were

... Colin, ah that was good the way several evenings when he thought Mariella wasn't looking had approached them glowing with his conviction that to him soul-kinship with Germans was as natural as breathing, and each time been so coldly rebuffed ... even the way he took it out on her with even more than the usual contempt for her words or opinions, till she almost gave up speaking at all, even that was worth it ...

And now, despite her dislike of them, Mariella could not help watching their every move, feeling somehow they swelled and filled the vast space of beach and sea and far-off mountains as if it were a tiny room too small for them, till they seemed to press up on her body like large people in the Underground, never doubting the space was theirs by right that by some flaw or accident of the universe she for this instant occupied.

The girl put the black book, diary it must be, she seemed to be scribbling in, world-indifferent, every time Mariella saw her, alike at meals or in the bar or on the beach aside, and dived into the water, breasts shark-sharp appearing instants later at the surface as she floated up on her back: the man on the boat seemed almost to lose his statue quality for an instant, in fact to teeter and lose his grace of heron-balance as he looked at her.

The brother, wasted leg twisted as if to point to her like setter's nose in an aristocrat-hunting film, otherwise, with his face at least, ignored her.

Seeming to look straight through Mariella till she closed her eyes again in fright, hoping, like the terror of a childhood nightmare, doing that'd make it go away.

When she, against her will, and having, so childishly she was ashamed of herself, counted 100 to make it safe, as a compromise between fear and impulse, opened them again, he was gone . . .

In the water now, moving toward his sister far out now at the edge of vision, his movement making it seem as if the Byron-crippled leg that turned his swimming into a fierce, misshapen, yet curiously graceful, greatness full even Leviathan or Ahab-whale thrashing, becoming an inherent total part of himself so that she couldn't imagine him perfect, a blond perfection too terrifying to permit other life on earth around it, terrible enough even in this state as if torn by great pincers all along one side from the womb so that leg became horrid, flaccid, shrunk and yet swollen with purple scar or mouthlike lumps, and arm of the same left side turned oddly outward and so milk-white, birdbone-transparent slim, so huge a contrast to the tan of the rest of him.

The water fountained as brother and sister met: they seemed to

enwrap in some game like a so-slow-motion football action replay or car crash and then sink.

A few minutes later, when Mariella looked again, a black speck marked the girl still swimming outward: the brother was ashore again, laid still where he had been before as if he'd never moved: he seemed waiting for something, perhaps her eyes on him: his eyes curiously hooded and yet perplexingly seeming, one anyway, the left one, bigger than it should have been, unblinking like an owl's eye or Henry Ford's: yes, it was true, the two halves of his face didn't match—embarrassed, after all one shouldn't stare at cripples, even if it hadn't been his leg she was looking at, she tried to pull her eyes away.

And couldn't help seeing, in his tiny modern trunks black as those sea urchins the kids nearly kept stepping on and then bringing up to the surface with pointed sticks to dance upon their spikes in the process of dying into husk on the breakwater, revenge Colin encouraged for one he'd stepped on the first day here, that in those black briefs a huge bulge had appeared—and her eyes could not move, trapped like nut between

nutcracker . . .

And for an instant she wished Colin'd appear and keep her safe—she'd even be glad to see all the rest of the English party back that doubtless now as every day were celebrating the absence of licensing hours in this country by having their first flask of wine at just the time the pubs would have legally opened up back home.

The pattern seemed to be repeating at ever-diminishing intervals, as if time was accelerating: her eyes closed again to shut out this further event, or sight rather as solid and precise on her eyeballs as an event: inside her head a vision like the "facts" that become so precise yet unrecapturable of half-sleep half-awake early morning states spelled out what could happen if her eyes by mistake should open: that black bulge could swell and burst her like a kid's balloon, shooting aimlessly in terror round a room emptying its air to nothing, or could even worse burst all over her horribly, a slime sac like that squid's in the old Captain Nemo film or even worse because pitiful as well as horrible the one all curiously peacock color, a little thing, only two big tentacles like a squid really. glistening hopeless and doglike under a fisherman's arm the way you'd carry a bagpipe, the day before yesterday on the market, exposed to sun and buying eyes and yet terrifying because so detached from ordinary reality, as her knee was that time when about ten she'd fallen in a half-demolished house and stuck it on a rusty girder and it had all swollen and begun to drip vile green pus and she'd been at home all lost, waiting for Mum or Dad to come home from work, not daring to go for help for

fear of their anger at her not being where she should be or having disobeyed instructions not to go in the old houses. And the green pus creeping out till she longed to touch it, lick it, see what it was like to taste, and the swelling winking at her and even the pain company in a way.

And was convinced as she lay there, sweat creeping down her back and hair, that he was watching, that German, smiling in a complicity of complete understanding of what she was thinking, not even contemptuous that she daren't open her eyes and see him watching, merely understanding like some godlike parent, the lie they used to tell 'em in R.I. courses before she was old enough to be sure she knew better.

The beach seemed so silent it must have emptied in, her sleeplike thoughts drummed out, emptied of everybody but her and him as if a WWIII filmset . . . sleep must've crept over her like an escape because suddenly there was Colin's voice in her ear saying, "Where has Robert got to now?"—irritation and unwillingness to go look himself and risk disruption of his own smooth self-absorption mised as smooth as gloss: she'd have to move, and she was so comfortable . . . it wasn't fair . . . what was the bastard saying now?

Opened eyes, straightened up onto her arms, head up and the light filling it like a blow: figure above her, still speaking.

And before she could clearly take in that it couldn't be Colin, *couldn't* be, he wasn't here, the voice suave, nameless accent which was really absence of recognizable accent, "I said have you ever been to the castle?"

She gasped, hand to mouth, fear or just shock: but he ignored her, ignored even it seemed any possible response she might make to his question, not really taken in anyway out of this doze she had been dragged from, this safety of warm blackness so suddenly lost.

The German's eyes were fixed on his sister emerging all petulant gold, some mutter of gutturals and hair thrown back in a shower of droplets, out of the water: and, just as Mariella tried to frame herself, started to say . . . "I don't know . . . do you mean . . . " he suddenly reached in his trunks and before she could even think or protest, pulled out a bulky skin-diving knife and drove it quivering into the sand hilt-deep only inches from her outstretched hand that seemed to go before her not yet-shaped words like a messenger.

So that was what the bulge in his trunks had been . . . horrid the sudden disappointment she felt, and then she tried desperately to recover her social manners. His face was knotted, gaze fixed on the knife, interest in her apparently completely gone, sister now out of sight behind rocks. "No, no we kept meaning to climb up there, if you mean the castle up

there behind Gradina, but we haven't had time, and besides it's so hot for such a climb, isn't it?"

Don't talk so much, too much, Colin always says you do that, you know you do: scurry of thought in Mariella. The German didn't seem to have heard at all.

Then his eye turned on her again, hawk stooping just as her heart had stopped accelerating and she was almost calm again, licensed watcher equally contemptuous of film stars godlike letting themselves be watched, and screeching adulation of fans watching: "So you have not been?" His voice far away and yet too close, like the echo effects you could get from the headland over there, where if you shouted at the right spot among rocks and clouded-blue butterflies and spiky growth, your voice resounded round all the alleys of the town piled up the hill and down their reflection into the bay like some sunken Avalon of Arthur's spoiled for her though by Colin's twittering and juggling trying to get it all in one photograph.

She shook her head uncertainly as if first off she'd planned a nod: and he looked over at his sister, "We're going . . . we've got to go, haven't we, Heidi, to make what must be right." There was no question in his voice: the girl, dressed now in toweling suit denim-colored, sneered at him and went on scribbling in her diary as if taking notes on what was said for some future trial:

But she did not contradict—and Mariella guessed, though unsurely, that her sneer was defiance to cover fear, perhaps not of her brother so much, but of something connected with him and his plans that loomed like a loop of Hammer Films fog, lasso about to snatch them all out of baking living daylight into some dark, some fear: and tried mentally to shake herself and get a grip, being fanciful like this was so unlike her usual self . . . licensed to be an audience, that was her role in this, no more, it didn't involve her . . . And the cripple said, "You will come too . . . you deserve it."

Mariella meant to ask what he meant, or refuse so oddly and rudely worded an invitation . . . do something to assert her will . . .

Stupidly the thought of such a journey terrified and attracted her both, like childhood scrumping in an evil-looking old man's garden, when what would happen if you were caught was subject of shapeless rumor, terrifying incomprehensible yet pleasurable as wetting yourself, involving sheds and hands and no one really knew what happened then . . .

No answer seemed to be necessary, which she was grateful for, feeling as weak as just after childbirth . . . "Heidi will get our packed lunches from the hotel."

Sulkily the girl, without showing any sign of having heard, closed her black book, snapped top decisively on pen, got up, collected her things, walked up the steps toward the terrace.

The hills, layer on layer, were blue torch paper over the water.

No answer or advice there. No Colin to say yes or no: If he were here and said "No" at least she'd have something to fight against, some way to sharpen her mind on opposition and so achieve decision.

The German ignored her now, leant back, offered a cigarette without a word, asked her for a light; but all as if in the presence of a mirror merely or a ghost, causing no ripple on his self-absorption.

She realized the horrible thing was that the German fascinated her because in so many ways he seemed just like a younger Colin.

She tried to take her mind off what was happening, peering at the freighter nearest to them, where some kind of loading of the blood-red alumina seemed finally to have begun. But it was just another toy, unreal, no clue to pattern, and even the reminder it gave her of her kids playing with boats in the bath merely made her feel guilty, obscurely dirty, as if she'd betrayed them in some way, so that her mind shied off that with relief back into blankness.

Shout from the corner of the hotel by the chapel: a cry wordless as a gull's.

"All is ready. Time to go."

The German rose, favoring his leg: Mariella had felt a brief impulse to help him to his feet, like an injured child with knee in plaster: but was glad she had resisted. The thought of his face full of wrath at such a liberty was more than she could bear.

She followed obedient as an Indian wife as he walked up the baking path.

He turned once he was in the shade, "Your clothes, where are they? It will be all thorns there, you cannot walk like that."

Guiltily, upset as when teacher'd caught her out with unwashed knickers one day when, having no gymslip clean, she stripped to them for PT, she rushed back, put blouse top and summer trousers back on, then gathered her oddments, and, to assert independence, took them the long way round to leave at reception, shouting "Just a minute" to the two Germans who stood under the tree like hungry statues waiting for the meal that would let them breathe.

As soon as she was level with them they started to walk: for an instant she was left to tag behind like an unwanted playmate, not knowing whether to run and catch up or keep walking that step or two behind, feeling foolish. Neither said anything.

She got the impression that Heidi resented her having been invited along: she walked along with a masked, unbetraying expression: but the lips seemed narrower than their usual sulky-sultry fullness, as if compressed together.

She showed no signs of walking slow to allow for her brother's limp, so Mariella, for the first time conscious of him as a cripple in that sense, rather than being merely someone powerful and fierce with an unusual badge of his nature, a driven leg for a lame king, daren't slow her steps either.

She was alongside them now, trying to match their pace exactly, as if in some unexplained way she'd be accepted if she did.

They passed the first houses of Gradina to the left, as the loop of road became the wider cobbled space, half square except it ran the full length of the town, curving along the bay, half dockside or harbor wall, boats and nets everywhere.

Mariella wanted to find some thing to say to the Germans, some comment to make on place or people, but every fragment of thought that crossed her mind seemed utterly banal. And anyway absence of conversation didn't seem to bother them at all: they would never feel forced to make conversation if stuck with a stranger in a train compartment, she thought, and wished she knew the cripple's name: but it would seem so idiotic to ask.

And all along the waterfront, and right round the loop of road climbing back opposite to the headland that looked over to the hotel, her mind was far away from the mechanical actions of walking, and the scene all around her, worrying away at why she had so easily, submissively, agreed to come along with them at the slightest word of asking. It made no sense in terms of the person she thought she was, none.

A light rain started, the sky gray and lowering now, as they climbed: the town round the harbor seeming slummy, threatening, a piece of home again.

She pulled the lightweight anorak out of her bag and put it on, getting the sleeves tangled as she hurried to keep up on the rough stones as Heidi and her brother still without a word turned off the main road just at the point where the sign illustrated falling rocks and steep gradient, and Mariella would have liked to stop and look down at the hotel, partly to get her breath back, and partly just because the hotel somehow now seemed a place of safety and familiarity.

The track the others moved up smoothly as water going uphill was

overhung by brambles and branches of what looked like, but probably wasn't, mountain ash and elder trees.

It turned and twisted as it climbed: the harbor hid like a teasing child in ambush, more fragments seen through the branches.

The rain grew steadily heavier, warm and wet and horrible like a rich man's hand, thought Mariella—and then tried to chide herself: her imagination out of control again, and those two diminishing up the path ahead of her agile as mountain goats.

She wanted to cry out, "Stop, wait for me," but her pride was hurt enough that she couldn't keep up even with a cripple, without being childish like that—or so she thought.

To her disgust her voice spoke against her will, "Can't we shelter till it stops?"

Heidi turned and smiled: it was like spittle in the face. Mariella scrambled on.

Just when she thought she'd collapse, they came onto flat ground: and, past some wild thistles, even onto a road, stony but still well-made.

"The road to the cemetery?"

"Of course," Heidi's answer to her brother: it was as if they spoke English only to annoy Mariella, since nothing they said seemed to be directed at her, excluding her totally . . . and then she realized that anyway those were the first words said since they'd left the hotel.

To the left, the road they had joined dived away into a watery grayness like old war naval films on the telly: there, Mariella thought, it must somehow curve back down to Gradina, perhaps the way the mysterious bus came she'd seen once or twice on the holiday, that no one ever seemed to get on or get off.

Perhaps it went to the dusty square where the market was, or the even more dried up walled off riverbed where the local kids played football with fishing nets for goals and Colin's guidebook said had been the Naval Arsenal in the times when Gradina was a great harbor . . . and cursed the little boys for disrespect in where they chose to play, when Mariella loved their ragged happiness, and tried to encourage her kids to go closer and perhaps get asked to join the game, till Colin harshly stopped her.

To the right, the road curved away over a steep scrubland: the two Germans set off up it without a backward glance, leaving Mariella behind as, hoping against hope for a brief break, she juggled with her bag that already cut deep into her shoulder with its strap.

Bag flopping, only half held on retightened buckle, she ran to catch up.

Oh this is ridiculous, she thought. She grabbed at Heidi's shoulder. The girl squirmed away as Mariella said, "What do they call your brother, then?"

"I thought you must be old friends."

A fellow woman, how could she be so horrible: surely they could have had such nice gossips together about all the other guests in the hotel, if they had only met earlier.

"No, seriously."

"Emico, after the great Emicoof Leininger, you must know of him, surely, the famous medieval Jew-killer."

Mariella fell back, feeling as if she had been slapped for nothing. Bloody Germans: she wished they'd all been killed in the war... Go back, that'd be the best thing, leave the horrible pair to it, that was what she ought to do.

Just say a cheery fairwell and run back down the road. In three-quarters of an hour, less maybe, she could be back in the hotel, safe from the rain, having a drink and reading her Maigret, at peace with everything.

In a minute from now she'd do it, a minute, turn back:

Oh look, her watch had stopped... somehow she was grateful for the excuse to delay, knowing pride'd never let her change her mind once she turned back on them. Somehow, today *must* make up for the failure all the rest of the holiday had been. Something must happen, something that would change everything.

Only why were they so horrible to her, why?

Suddenly she was grateful to the rain as to a surprise present, for it hid her tears.

Presently, trudging along after them, she decided to assert herself. She must, she must!

All along the roadside now curious blue-green thorn bushes, almost like Christmas trees flattened by hammers, anything from six inches to ten feet tall, and spiky, so spiky. She pressed alongside Emico; pointed at one, ran over and touched it till it scratched like a cat's kiss, strangely familiar even in its newness, "What is it? What are they?"

"You would not understand our name for them. In your tongue, Jerusalem Thorn."

"Why?"

"In the story, the Romans used them to crucify women who asked too many questions."

Heidi laughed, a harsh dry laugh like desert wind.

Mariella shrank back into herself, hunched into the rain as small as

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she could, wishing really it would lash down and make her blind or unconscious, anything to end her humiliation and embarrassment.

The road curved on uphill. Now there was nothing to fasten the eye to: the sea and Gradina invisible, only rolling slopes of Jerusalem Thorn,

occasional trees looming huge among such featurelessness.

A roar, and out of the murk a blue and white bus hurtled by: they had a glimpse of it coming straight at them. Mariella leapt into the brush, scratching her legs. Emico and Heidi stood stock still, glaring at the scruffy, rain-blurred driver with contempt. Somehow it swerved and missed them. The only contents were three shapeless black lumps at the back, old women, doubtless, and something white beside them that could have been a bundle of chickens or a goat. Yet despite her fright, Mariella could have cried with relief at seeing something human. She kept her face straight, feeling an inch high to not have stuck it out like the others. They said nothing.

A curve, a small horizon.

Over it, a white wall, a small white building with brown roof, looking a little like an electricity sub-station. Around it, white stiff figures as if a frozen picnic of nudists. Two cypresses sheltered the space on the side where the sea must be: the cemetery.

Still no human word from the two Germans.

More apparently unending slope. Another small horizon.

A dip: and far ahead, a cluster of houses half-hidden in trees, and across the next ridge a line of telephone poles or similar, marching to and from the village, whatever it was.

Mariella hoped they'd pass through it. Even unfriendly natives'd be better than this endless silent trudge with people who obviously hated her, walking stiffly on either side of her now like guards: and perhaps, perhaps, there'd be a cafe where she could stop and have a drink of lemonade, or beer even if in a place like this they let women drink. She'd even spend the little money she had left on a taxi, just to get away from Gradina.

From the village, a dog barked. Another joined in from a far patch of twisted trees to the left, another equally far off from a third cluster to the right. The rain had eased to a nasty wet-clamminess, like the feel of neck and back and underpits when she woke from an awful cold sweat nightmare: and of course always Colin slept through pig-comfortable in his own pit, the hollow nest well away from any contact with her that he always made of his half of the bed.

And suddenly, the other two turned off, turning her with them like a hinge with a door, onto a dried up path through the thorn that angled

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off three-quarterwise into the thorn tangle. Which once entered, was nowhere dense as it looked.

She tried to strengthen herself to say, "This is far enough for me: I'm turning back now. Goodbye." But the words wouldn't come. Her feet seemed to have a life of their own, torpid, painful, yet strong enough to overcome her conscious intelligence completely.

They passed a half-built bungalow, square air-hole pierced blocks of

cement rising like a deserted gun-emplacement from old war.

Somehow, some geese had climbed onto the uncompleted roof, and gabbed ferociously from there.

Otherwise, the landscape seemed deserted. Even the road seemed miles away now, and the telegraph poles were hidden by a swell of ground. The thorns grew higher, and the last roof was out of sight.

To the right, the land fell away, but she could not even see the inland sea that at least would have given her thoughts a guide to something

familiar, the hotel's whereabouts.

The far mountains of the coastal range were hidden in the gray drizzle.

"Is this the shortest way to the castle?" She could keep silent no longer. The landscape was as cold and unwelcoming as home in late autumn November misery: she could not truly believe they were on the latitude of Florence, it all seemed a huge trick of Colin and the tour company and these Germans combined, to leave her, Mariella, helpless and miserable. For a minute she genuinely believed Colin had planned this all along, to leave her to the mercy of these Germans, and had she not asked to stay today, would have thought of some excuse to make her.

Neither German answered. She felt even more like a snubbed child. Through the thorn toward them came a jangling, a harsh calling, somewhere between scream and guffaw.

She was terrified.

The violent beating of her heart did not stop even when several stout women appeared, two in the familiar black, one, kerchiefed, in a blue dress with gold and red embroidery.

They chased, sticks in hand, after a black, vile-looking donkey that charged wildly through the brush, braying, haw hawing, insane with excitement, legs kicking like a chorus girl on pep pills. To its back clung a child and a pair of panniers—full of wood: all strapped on.

Mariella came out with her laboriously learned word for good day, "Jindobry." The women muttered something, rushing past. The Germans ignored them.

Mariella was sure, as one woman stopped to stare, the kerchiefed one,

and Mariella looked back as if to implore help, wordlessly, that the woman gestured to her a warning, "Go back."

"I wish I dare," she muttered. Emico turned, looked at the woman. She made another gesture, this time two spread fingers of the left hand... Mariella thought, "It can't be that rudeness, not a woman..." and half remembered something similar they'd shown on the telly against the Evil Eve.

Then she was gone into the dry scrub and tangled bushes, some nameless mixture of gorse and broom and bramble, where the others had vanished in their fixed voiceless change. Soon even the donkey's cackling was inaudible.

More spiny bushes, more wind-twisted brush and bent-back gorse: the path winding, splitting sometimes like a river delta, joining and rejoining. Trees to the left, well-ahead, coming nearer and nearer: dry and small and oaklike. They came nearer, merged into a windbreak looming above a wall. The path followed them, then passed through at a jagged gap, went on between innumerable low walls of small stones piled together, and dry thorns wedged into barricades, creating a maze of tiny fields, some with stunted grapes in, knee high, hung with gray-purple bunches, diseased somehow in appearance, the vine-leaves a strange turquoisy deep blue-green.

To the right a flattened conical hill loomed, bare save for scrub to the summit. Mariella was sure she'd seen nothing like that from the hotel window: yet their window opened in what must be this direction.

The fields became more varied: no bigger than a carpet, some, the biggest the size of a small terraced street, narrow and interlocked like a complex but boring jigsaw, they held such things as marrows, purplish cabbagelike plants, dried grass, something like broccoli, currantlike fruit bushes, all stunted, all mishappen.

Though the sea was still invisible, the wind that carried the moisture as the rain died, was salt, sealike yet not fresh.

The twisted trees closed about the road, if white stones scattered, bumped, crushed together, stabbing up at feet till Mariella felt as though she walked on glass, could be called road.

A tiny village rimmed round a widening of the road: low squalid whitewashed buildings. A huge black dog rushed out, barking violently: then a man in stained blue overall-like clothes, with beret and paradoxical modern dark glasses slouched from the door of an even squalider hut than most, decorated with a battered Coca-Cola sign, shouted the dog off: and as the Germans indifferently walked on, while Mariella

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lingered terrified of the dog till it should obey him and clear her path, he gestured at her, gestures she was sure meant "go back, go back."

She wished she could explain to him that she was equally terrified of going back alone, of showing herself up: that everything about this day had become one mass of fear in which staying close to the Germans, despite their so blatantly expressed contempt, their sneering silence, was at least the lesser of possible evils.

When she walked forward across the barren shapeless square to catch up with the others disappearing between fresh trees farther ahead, he shrugged, dived back with the dog into the squalid bar or whatever it was: from the corner of her eye she saw telephone or electric wires plunge to it from emptiness. Here too where no car could come they must have "On the Buses." It comforted her a little.

As she ran to catch up she sensed rather than saw other figures gather round the door behind, to watch: their voices seemed to carry a gleeful regret, a "told you so" flavor.

She wished she was back at the hotel, laid on the beach waiting for Colin. She wished she'd never seen or even dreamed of this horrid hinterland, that she could never even explain to any friend or relative, those who expected only to have to see pictures with famous beauty spots on, or have to listen to how dear English beer was in the hotel. To try to explain how horrible *this* was back home, would be to push their tolerance, their family tolerance in which every member undertook to allow himself to be bored by the others so he too could have his turn to bore, too far.

The road, track, more a path to walk on single file now, went on between stone banks and blackberry hedges with the fruit overlarge, overripe, over-touched by flies laying belated eggs.

The odd artificial looking hill was ahead, then to the right, then behind.

The path began to climb slowly toward a ridge ahead, thick in trees.

The little fields continued, more and more of them now overground with thistle, thorn, wild grass and other weeds. Those still cultivated were now mostly grape, and even between the grandmother-bent blue-purple-grape-cluster carrying vines here weeds grew, and the supporting wires were rusted, tangled.

The rain had stopped: the sky was heavy with vast dark clouds, but that odd hill was lit by a luridly-clear light, and ahead the ridge was silhouetted against a painful brightness that must lie over the Adriatic.

A small cracked horse-trough-cum-fountain, with blurred inscription. It had flooded, or the spring that fed it had, and the path dived here

into a muddy spreading pond a few hundred yards wide, filling the last hollow before the way climbed toward the ridge.

"This way," Emico that, his first words in miles. Heidi silent, merely sneered back at Mariella as if to say "you won't make it." Mariella determined nothing would make her admit defeat before that bitch, that cow.

Emico led the scramble up a steep bank to the right: a painful hop-skip-jump through—over blackthorn and wire tangle: a scrabble through abandoned rotting cabbages where oddly the ground felt as heavy, cloggy, marshy as English clay in a boggy field.

Another wire to bend and clamber under, feeling it catch and rip the anorak that was the only new thing bought for this holiday.

Another grape patch, the most derelict looking yet.

"If no one wants them, do you think I could take some?" Mariella, hunger, thirst, greed to be noticeable at least, if not noticed. Emico turned, lip twisting, "It is up to you."

Bastard, she thought . . . and hated herself even more for asking. With beating heart, eyes swiveling round for some hidden shotgun-carrying farmer watching just waiting to spring out, she pulled clumsily a couple of huge bunches of the tiny grapes, black from this close up, the weight of their abandoned richness tugging them nearly into the red clamminess of the soil.

A loud noise made her jump violently.

Heidi laughed contemptuously. Mariella followed her finger's arrogant motion. Only an old white horse drinking from the muddy pond.

They were making their way along the edge of a sunken dry ditch, overgrown by brambles from the hedge that rimmed the road, and a small wood as wild yet artificial looking as something from a school version of "Midsummer's Eve," when the rain began again full force. In seconds everything was blotted out. A crow or starling or some such black bird squawked past to dive into the hedge.

Butterflies fluttered into the tangle.

"Can we shelter, please? It's so wet." Mariella against her will couldn't help leaving them yet another opening for scorn.

The cripple nodded. "We would not wish our little guest to drown."

Almost human his voice then.

But by the time Mariella had arranged herself under an overhang of some thick hazelnutlike bush, clear of the heavy drips already beginning at its outer fringes, bag under her to give a dry sitting-space, hoping against hope there were no ants, she realized she had ended up not next to him but to his sister, with Emico beyond her. They sat in silence for a while.

Then the girl pressed Mariella's shoulder with a sharp oddly jagged nail, almost as painful as the rock she had realized was beneath her leg, hidden in grass, and that by its very intensity of discomfort immunized her against everything, or almost everything at least.

Mariella looked round.

This close up the sense of heat, of warm colors, of power to eat life whenever it came in reach of those glittering white teeth, was all but overwhelming.

"Yes?"

"Do you want my brother?"

Mariella couldn't think what if anything to say, so she said nothing, merely looking attentive. It had got her through school, courtship, marriage, almost unhurt, this technique, perhaps it would save her now.

"Because if you want him I will ask him for you, he might let you . . . it would be good for him, he is under much strain, he needs to relax before what we must do."

The rain was a wall in front of them, inches away, making all the rest of the world a wet wilderness. Here, this dry burrow was like something in a dream, all normal connections, family, husband, children, were beyond reach as far as a star. Mariella realized abruptly just how badly she did want the cripple to plunge into her, rip her, wipe out years of being a good girl, a good daughter, good wife, good mother.

But she wouldn't, couldn't, ask for favors. Let him ask himself, not have this horrible sister, this hellcat pimp for him as casually and indifferently as if she was asking fishheads for a cat.

"He could ask me himself."

The girl nodded, as if that was what she expected: a chance to serve a god and of course such a foolish, useless creature set conditions, in effect ruined the chance to be of dumb, obedient service down. Typical human scum.

That at least was what Mariella read in her face.

And sat hugging her knees in dumb misery, wondering if she'd thrown everything away.

But he could've asked her himself, couldn't he. And at least asked his sister to go away for a bit. Did they really expect her to make love to him here in this horrid ditch like a new grave, all wet earth, and with that creature watching and doubtless taking notes in her black book? They must be inhuman, must be. Only he was so lovely, so powerful, and so sad.

But the rain stopped seconds after Heidi turned away indifferently

from her. The rain stopped, and a shaft of sun briefly lit the clearing before them, throwing the wood's darkness into greater contrast. And Emico got up, stiffly so that suddenly Mariella as well as fear and anger and longing felt pity.

And stumped away.

Not in the whole time had the Germans looked at a map.

Yet now even that odd-shaped hill was lost from view in the swells of land, and the sea, and as the clouds closed again so too was the sun.

There were no landmarks, yet without hesitation Emico, after leading them down a bank of earth back onto the familiar path, round the next bend led them off it into the woodland.

Over a curiously short smooth sward like a dance-floor thrown down in the wilderness.

On through trees bent before some wind. At first they were full height, but their tops must be flattened by the prevailing ridge, she realized after a time, so that as they climbed the slope between these twisted trunks, the roof over their heads, the roof of matted branches and leaves, grew nearer and nearer, and the trees among which they climbed, shorter and shorter.

Till suddenly the roof came down to meet them, an impenetrable tangle of branches, or so it seemed.

But Emico vanished through it, then Heidi.

And Mariella, pushing forward, found a tiny opening, a goat's exit perhaps: just as her hair tangled among some branches behind.

A knife flashed before her eyes. She was terrified, thinking, "this is it, they've brought me here to kill me, sex fiends, that's what they are, German murderers, it'll be in the 'News of the World'."

And was trying to gather breath against the yawn-thickening lump in her throat of utter terror, the knife and hand made more frightening because she could not see the body to which it belonged, when it passed by her head and smoothly, neatly, trimmed the end of her hair: she felt a brief tug at the roots, a tiny pain.

And was free and scrambling out onto the ridge, cursing her foolishness.

To see Emico and Heidi staring indifferently away from her, looking upward and onward, facing forward. "Thank you." Ignored, as if help had never been given her to get free. She turned to look back from where they had come, to cover her embarrassment.

And gasped in wonder.

The wood lay before her like a floor, as if she could walk away on it, from the yard-high or smaller dwarf oaks at her feet to the farthest giants.

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Beyond, the maze of tiny misshapen fields, the shapes and colors of germs and leucocytes in school biology.

That odd bunker-shaped hill, dwarfed now to a skull's hat in a

Western.

And the sea back again, old friend, a gray oily pond stretching far off to the rusty patches of alumina quarry and black specks of freighters. And, far to the right, the roofs of Gradina and even, if she strained her eyes, what she was sure was the hotel. And the pile on pile of coastal mountains, no longer torch paper blue, a bleached gray now beneath the blackened gray of sky, bone displayed on black velvet like jewels she wished Colin would buy her but he never did, not that they could afford, but at least sometime couldn't he say he wished he could buy her just some small diamond?

Behind her, the very faintest sound of impatience.

She turned, but both still had their backs to her: there was no knowing which it was.

And the impact was like a physical blow of what she saw: gravity seemed to turn and spin dizzily so that the wild scurry of clouds she looked up at was like a chasm into which she wished to fall, a waterfall round the central lure.

The castle, that some blindness had not let her see, shock of that knife just past perhaps, loomed vast overhead, seeming about to topple on her, seize her throat, so huge it piled above.

She covered her eyes a second, then looked again. Perspectives steadied.

In fact it must be a good quarter of a mile away: beyond another dip full of wild rocks and brush and even a few olives and pines, it piled hugely up on top of a savage face of cliffs, on which it in turn added a fantastic complex of towers and pinnacles. Where from far back at the hotel it had looked tiny, tame, more blockhouse than anything else, and appearing to be on quite low hills, she realized now all this was entirely trick of distance and the intervening layers of ridges. This was something huge.

"Originally built as the Monastery of the Holy Tooth and the Holy Thorn, both believed to have been brought here by the Virgin Mary during her flight from the revenge of Rome... pilgrims believed that here they would if worthy receive not just their heart's desire, but Heaven's purest interpretation of it... and this belief, which persisted even after the monastery became a fortress of a succession of peoples, was one reason for the ferocity of its defense against the Turks. Jankovic Kula was the hero of the siege, one of the greatest generals of the Croat

resistance, pirate more than servant of any king, and his victory here was one of the turning points stopping the Turkish advance, as important in its way as the successful defenses of Malta or Vienna."

Emico looked at neither of them as he said this, his eye instead fixed on the silhouetted, hard-to-clearly-define collar of towers like a thunderlizard's ruff she'd once seen in a zoo, chest puffed out and hissing, vast round the huge central tower.

He sounded so like Colin in one way, reeling out his unwanted information: yet somehow with him it was painfully moving, made her want to clutch him like a child and rub him better, kiss him better, as if his knowledge all sprang from an unhealed wound. And the tentaclelike white crippled arm seemed to rise and point at the building's vastness over there against his will, as a plant turns toward the sun.

Mariella could not keep silent. "Your heart's desire," she stammered it out, nearly drying up under Heidi's baleful glare turned on her now.

Emico answered in a tone more natural than anything else she'd yet heard him say, "Your heart's desire, yes: but your true heart's desire, what you may not even know you want, not what you think you want, or your reason does . . . that is the legend, anyway." His voice died away to boredom with the last words, and he stumped away among the bushes, aiming toward those colossal foundations soaring above them.

They followed him as he moved into the growth of bush: the sky seemed full of those vast walls ahead, and for the last few minutes of the walk, like the last few minutes before going into the headmaster's study at school when she'd been reported for cheating which she had not done but was too shy to deny, and knew beforehand she would be too shy to deny, so that she knew in advance she'd be punished for something she had not done, only because it was a friend of hers who'd really cheated, who was a teacher's pet, and the teacher, Birdie they called him because his name was Wren, bespectacled and scared looking and, so older girls said, stood so often at the stairbottom so he could look up skirts, hated Mariella particularly because once when in an R.I. class he'd asked who didn't believe in God and Mariella not knowing one way or the other had been the only one to put her hand up, just because her father said he was an atheist, being an ex shop-steward sacked for agitating, and she feeling loyal, and ever since Birdie had hated her, jeering her as "The Godless One" in front of all the class, like these last few minutes of movement seemed somehow at one and the same time the terrible end of everything and also a liberation, because somehow she was sure, just from fear of being anything else, she was going to be no matter what the crunch true to herself.

The gate was an anti-climax.

The slope had risen imperceptibly: almost down on hands and knees to scramble over butter and egg plants and tiny blue flowers and past dry growths on which butterflies hung like eyes, they looked up only at the last minute before crashing headlong into it.

The tower was incredibly smooth, the stones as close-joined as if they were plastic. The mellowing of lichen and creeper seemed irrelevant, like lipstick on an old woman. The gob of gate itself was vast and blackened wood bound by huge iron bonds, hinges and keyholes and chains in profusion like Houdini costume exaggerated for a TV show.

Emico grasped the vast handle of the door, itself four times a man's

height.

The door clanged, but did not give.

Emico seemed human as in temper he bashed and crashed at it.

Mariella realized that, horrible as these people were, these so alluring, so vile Germans, they were still infinitely better than being here alone. Yet paradoxically she could not help believing, somewhere at the back of her mind, that had she been here alone somehow the door would have magically opened for her: that she would have got in where they could not.

There was some muttering in German between Emico and Heidi, with glances at the smooth sweep of stonework up to just-visible battered battlements. They must have seen it as hopeless.

Emico started along the wall's foot to the right, forcing his way through prickly growth with exaggerated motions of obviously restrained fury. For the first time Mariella pitied him, despite her determination not to be affected by his crippledom.

He vanished from sight.

Heidi sneered at Mariella, as if to say "You wait there, useless, you'd only be in the way", then dived after him into the tangle that grew right to the masonry's foot.

Mariella sat down: emptied a stone from her shoe that had hurt for ages but she'd felt too embarrassed to touch. Then climbed behind a growth of spiny dry branches, and let herself piss.

And finally, just for luck, gave one last bang on the great door that seemed to belong not in the real world but in a fairy tale of dungeons to frighten children.

Echo, echo of resounding noise.

Silence enough for the dust a lizard stirred to fall with a scrabbling noise among the roots of the brush.

And then, far off within, a sound of movement. A bell, seeming, and

then a clank drag as if of huge metal feet. Terrifying: except that Mariella was so pleased to have succeeded where Emico had failed, she would have welcomed even the King of Hell to prove her point.

Silence, till she thought her ears had gone back on her, and the sounds had been an illusion.

Far up above the walls a jet fighter slipped lazily westward toward the sea, its modernity seeming as irrelevant to where and when they were as a stoat at a pet rabbit show—when all the rabbits too had nice sharp teeth.

While Mariella's eyes were still following it flying so free in air, and wishing she could escape somehow somewhere up where no one could reach or pressure, there was a sharp sound like a pistol shot right in front of her.

She sprung round, startled, her foot dislodging a trail of small pebbles that clattered away down the slope, setting a brief hush to the cicada chorus, while one of them, brilliant red its wings, so neatly hidden when they sit, so huge and phosphorescent when they fly, flittered past before her face, a second shock.

So that she had only half recovered when she saw an eye peering out at her from what seemed to be the solid fastness of the great door: and screamed.

A funny wheedling voice, at the same time bubbling and effeminate, like a choked spring, came at her, and suddenly a section of the gate wheezed outwards. She jumped back realizing suddenly that what she'd seen was first a small judas-eye grating opening, and then a kind of wicket gate, its hinges rusted near solid.

"Like Alice in Wonderland" she thought, and felt oddly safe again.

And the man who appeared, beckoning and gesturing in a way that seemed paradoxically at one and the same time to fend her off and urge her in, was not frightening either. Misshapen yes, bent sideways by some deformity. Frightening, no.

Perhaps it was the huge grin. Tooth-filled, brown, but so shaped into a permanent smile the mouth that no one could resist it unless he hated laughter itself. And the eyes, blue and clear as a rainwashed sky amidst a face so wrinkled, tanned, dirt and berry and scratch stained it could have been an old map of mountains better than a human visage, were absolutely guileless.

The rest of him, in shapeless denim and torn, smoke-blackened leather flying jacket, crumpled beret with oddly Scottish pom-pom crammed down over greasy black and gray ladder-streaked curls, his body twisted across the gap of the little wicket-gate like a spoon bent in careless hands,

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and round the heels a dog, black and border collieish, leaping and lolloping and barking in idiot joy at the excitement of a visitor, seemed all of a piece with the image of a toy broken clumsily but still trying to perform its amusing tricks with all the fragmentary life left in the clockwork.

The man's gibberish was incomprehensible, slavering and bubbling, odd squeaks and almost-soprano waverings ending his question-shaped phrasings, even had she spoken Croatian.

She tried, hard, not to laugh at him: after all, you shouldn't laugh at the afflicted, and anyway he was so likeable-looking, and, a warning voice from childhood "Don't talk to strangers" talks at schools cried, the childish-seeming are often the most dangerous with their sudden grasping sweaty hands that really only want to play but break what they play with, clumsily and without intent. But the laughter burst out, all the same, almost hysterical. Partly relief, perhaps, that the Germans seemed to have definitely vanished. Even the sound of movement through the bushes distantly round the curve of wall was now inaudible.

The man laughed too, a weird yet not unpleasing peeling trill.

"Can I come in?" speaking very slowly, pointing and gesturing as in dumb talk: Mariella's efforts produced no enlightenment, only more laughter. The dog slipped past his legs and leapt up, licking, at her. She held it off, half embrace, half blow, and tried again, pointing at herself, then the gate, then the man, pantomiming movement forward with her feet. A few drops of rain splattered, and then, as if that had been last curtain, the sun suddenly burst through the black heavy clouds, falling straight in her face almost blinding, so that wall and man and dog still leaping up all became silhouettes against its brightness.

The man must've understood: he stepped back, swinging the wicket aside, whistling the dog clear, so that she had room to pass.

She felt a vast sense of triumph that she'd got a step ahead of the Germans, got in first, a kid's one-upmanship, gloriously complete, the more so that she had no one to show off to.

Past the gate, she looked round in delight at a tangled garden, a hidden place almost become miniature forest with the growth of trees she knew she must've learned about at school but couldn't recognize, some like cypresses, some oakshape, some feather-dustery firs so that all the air was stirred by their slight movement.

She looked back at the gate, meaning to persuade the man to leave it open for Heidi and Emico to get in. But already, whistling, he'd locked the wicket with a huge rusty key, one of a number on a ring that he carefully placed on a hook above, where slits in the arch's curve must

once have been, Mariella thought with a shiver of excitement, have been used once to pour down oil or drop portcullises on attackers.

It was just like being a child again. She wanted to run through the garden, try to find where this wall went, and the one that must lie ahead, visible in tantalizing glimpses through the treetops: or sing, or stand on her head. Reluctantly, she decided to be sensible.

She tried to indicate to the custodian, or whatever he was, village idiot without a village, to open the gate again.

All he did was point at himself, and mutter something that sounded like Stepan, and at the dog, and a further mutter that could have been anything but which she took as Bozo because that dog from her childhood had been Bozo: and then smiling he beckoned her forward, and she followed, trying to look in all directions at once.

A few yards on, and the path forked, round a huge broken fountain, one that must have lost its function centuries ago, since an even huger cactus-type thing, with serrated edge tongue-shaped leaves, grew in some odd way not round but through the cracked and broken rim, a patch of sun amidst the gloom in which lizards skittered like droplets of the long-ago water it had once held and danced with.

She peered at the plant, trying to remember what Colin had said it was called, carving his name through the leaf on one they'd seen like it on one of the excursions, till the plant's so armored-looking flesh seemed to bleed sap and she cringed with a borrowed and, she knew consciously, totally irrational pain with the thought of all through its growth the wounds of those irregular razor-cut gouged letters growing with it, unending scars just so Colin could leave his name behind.

As she turned away to follow the gesturing man and leaping dog, both urging her eagerly on, the name came back. Agave. She wished for an instant she were like that, tough and spiny and almost immortal: only then fools'd come and carve their names on her—and anyway she was in danger of turning into one of these silly sentimental middle-class women you got on telly dramas, who had nowt better to do than think about themselves and their ailments.

She moved faster to catch up with her guides, but the perfect place was a little spoiled.

Shadows seemed to swallow them, and as she came up to where they'd vanished, she realized why.

Two towers loomed to left and right, and between them the path passed into the gloom of a second great arch, recessed deeply: here the portcullis was still just visible, jammed and askew high up in the curvature. Once into the tunnel, her eyes began to recover from the abrupt dive into darkness.

The arch-roofed passageway bent, and just as they reached the bend, low doors opened to left and right. Ahead, now, she could see sunlight in another inner courtyard, and for a second she thought she heard a clucking as of hens. The dog barked, and silence.

The guide seemed to be waiting for her to decide which way to go.

She moved toward the right-hand door, the heavy stone underfoot striking cold through the soles of her feet.

Something made the hair at her nape stiffen, a horrid low humming, like wind in far off telegraph wires, or bees in pinewoods.

Mariella looked up.

Dimly above her, in a niche like a saint-holder on a church wall, a carved marble bust stared down. Horrible, sightless; it took her an instant of staring, transfixed, to realize the vile quality of the stare came from the fact that the white eyes had no pupils. The face was metal-stern: the nose big, the curl of twin-forked beard jagged as if trimmed only occasionally and then with a sword: some sort of helmet was carved round, its deeper shadow and constriction emphasizing pools of dark like a skull's holes along high cheekbone line, and the pride, and at the same time oddly humorous cruelty, as if to remain straight faced for the sculptor.

The guide from behind whispered suddenly in her ear, so she jumped, something about "Ban . . . Turki . . . " and then a stumble of German, "Grosse Graf," Great Count, that she half-knew from one of Colin's many show-off lectures, and then something that sounded like "death" repeated, and gesturings with fingers as if he was doing the universal shopkeeper count for five, tens, fifties, hundreds, and "Turchken, krieg, grose krieg, hier", all half hidden in the gloom, misshapen as a spider's shadow, and then a sudden flash of teeth and wave of hands as if to convey how communication was helpless but at least they both meant well . . . and the buzzing or humming started again: she looked up then jumped back as a stick thrust past her.

The head fell sideways in its niche, and behind she had just time to see that its back was hollow and filled with a vast gray beard or cornucopia shaped hive or nest, when black shapes hurtled out in a cloud. A hand pulled her back and the cloud shot past into the garden, hornets they must be and vanished, still droning that horrid bagpipish noise.

She leant against the wall, gasping, palpitating.

Too much was happening, too fast.

The bust tottered in its niche. The guide leapt forward, and somehow

caught it one handed just as it all but reached the stone flags. As he held it up close for her to admire the horrid sightless eyes, she noticed chipped places on nose and ears: doubtless every visitor, if he ever got any other, was treated to the dislodging of hornets—and he confirmed her suspicion by somehow scrambling up the apparently glass smooth walls to replace the face in its niche where it glimmered down balefully, a patch of dead whiteness like the moon or an unwanted child.

She wanted to get back into the sunlight, and started to move toward the inner courtyard, wishing to get the visit over with and wishing too the Germans'd appear to protect her against any more shocks or at least diffuse their effect, make them more a shared traveler's tale than a sudden heartstopper for one.

But the guide pulled at her arm, into the little door on the opposite side of the passage.

They passed into a gloomy chamber, its few windows thick with dust, high and barred against the light.

Shapeless objects littered it, on walls and floor.

Peering about, she made out what seemed to be battleaxes, rusty swords, a suit of armor; on another wall things like the pikes the Beefeaters had, and then a 'snap' at her feet. She jumped back, wondering how much more her heart would take as she realized from the little guide's horrid, dry, almost hysterical laugh that it was some sort of mantrap he'd snapped shut just short of her foot by a hidden mechanism.

On through a further passage into another room.

More obscure, gloom hidden relics.

On a lectern, a huge Bible, chained up.

She opened it: faintly she could make out a wood engraving of a horridly realistic devil in whose mouth was swallowed all of what was either a woman or very effeminate man except the legs and buttocks, splayed out as if the agony was enjoyable.

In a corner, tilted against the wall, a kind of cart or open carriage, with huge long shafts.

Along one wall, furled on poles, what must once have been flags or banners, but were now merely muddy brown collections of moth holes: the least breeze, she thought, would make them fall to lacelike dust.

The guide stared at her beseechingly, like a pet wanting his ears scratched. Obligingly, she peered closely at them trying to look awed, serious, as if in church.

It meant nothing to her. He seemed content. Colin, she knew, would have known just what it all meant.

She sneezed, violently: the cold and dampness was too much.

Another passage.

A room darker still, high-columned, where shapes lurched and made odd snuffling noises.

The guide pointed, banged on something, bounced on it. Laughed,

and the dog barked as if with laughter.

Her eyes focusing at last. A kind of camp bed, but double size, filthy with a nestlike mass of straw mattress and sheets so black the noise must be them knocking to get out.

And all around in the gloom, curiously stained sheep, "piss color" she

thought, and giggled hysterically.

The room receded vastly into the gloom: a banquet hall, perhaps.

Yet another passage, still following that will-o-the-wisp pair of figures, manlike guide and doglike guide.

Christ, the place must be vast. And why call on Christ, Colin always told her how idiotic it was, this superstitious falling back to childhood in any crisis.

Still, he wasn't here. Nor anyone else to protect her.

Light ahead. They must be nearly back at the courtyard. Thank God. This time she'd just make straight back through the gate, with profuse thanks, and money even, if the little man wouldn't be hurt, anything to get away from him, and here.

And within feet of the light and the smell of some strange flower and the jerky leap of a butterfly, a hand on her arm. The guide again, turning

her toward the passage wall, a deeper dark.

A soft sound outside, was this a whisper of encouragement?

A trick of wind, probably, she could see a little swirl of dust out there.

A push at her back, some muttering she could not understand, and then, in what she knew was German but meant nothing. "Quelle, gross quelle, brunnen, tief, tief" still no clarity in her brain.

The hand in her back pushing her forward. Sheer darkness all round now, only a step or two into the hollow opening in the wall, but blackness absolute: underfoot, rough, hollowed, the very slightest declivity. A breath of cold, foul air.

And she stopped, grabbed outward. Hands on emptiness, then scrabbling backward onto walls. And a leap back.

The little guide's arm passed her, lighting a match, muttering, chattering, like a pansy interior decorator or a monkey.

And in the faint yet harsh flare of the match, emptiness dropping away at her feet beyond all sight, and a far wall, tormented twisted living rock. Shivering, she threw a small coin from her purse, not even looking to

see what denomination it was. It bounced on the far wall, fell. And long, long afterward not even a loud splash, a splash tiny beyond belief.

She ran, frantic, toward the light, brushing mancreature and dog aside, her breath gasping, heaving, ripping her throat raw as if she'd run ten miles.

And a voice calm, posh, Queen's English as if the BBC from some Third Programme Tutorial, "Too bad—the due has not been paid after all. We must think of something else."

She halted her headlong run, tried to clear eyes blurred with tears of panic, blazed almost blind by the sudden light.

A few feet away across the courtyard stood the most unlikely person she could imagine there.

Middle-height, not fattish yet somehow implying corpulence . . . and the very first impression, so sharp it withstood even scrutiny of jarring detail, was of a British army officer from one of those "stiff upper lips, chaps, over the top now" wartime films. The little stiff tash, the red face, redness showing even under the weathered tan, the cropped fair hair, the stiffness of carriage and the vaguely tweedy vaguely patched clothes: even to black eye patch worn like monocle.

"Well, that's too bad, Carruthers of the F.O."

That same nervous impulse that had always made her speak out in class at school, speak out against her will with the dreadful pun, the cheeky remark, the comment any teacher took as rebellion and sneer. Yet never intended as that, some longing merely to be accepted whatever she did, reassured that she had a right to be there, to exist: even the reluctant laughter of schoolmates who hated her really for being too clever, the hurled blackboard eraser or chalk of goaded teacher who till then had unassailed held grip of class and now had to fight near hysteria of choked giggles by classmates, even these were better, these and the inevitable punishment, the dreadful wait for cane or letter to parents, than sitting in the class, silent, friendless, unknown.

And sometimes it had worked to exorcise her fears. The bully of a girl two classes higher, nailbitten, huge, hair cropped like a footballer, who'd attacked and terrified her rabbit-shivering so often on the way home.

And one time had started to tease her, set as monitor at their school dinner table.

Only this one time Mariella had turned, not brave, merely so embarrassed by her terror she had let her unconscious speak. "Get back in your cage, ape. I'll rattle your bars when I need you."

The gale of half-choked laughter this time had been armor.

The bigger girl had flinched as if hit in the stomach. Perhaps the

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comparison had been her secret vision of herself and how the world saw her, the barrel chest and slightly hair chin and biceps.

She had never bothered her again.

And even, three years later, seen by Mariella one cold winter afternoon turning too quickly dark on the way home, the older girl already having left school and being, as far as anyone could learn, an ineffectual cinema usherette, had invited her, harsh yet pleading, to go into the bushes with her down Dobson Bank, saving she had some new rainbow-striped knickers she wanted to show Mariella.

But someone had called Mariella, "Hey, your dad's waiting with the car" and Mariella never saw her again.

The same impulse, to strike out with words when fear gets too much. But this one, stood, fiftyish, even in his sixties perhaps, firm in his half-shadowed corner in the arch-colonnaded yard, dim as if night was where he was, even the sqawking scrabbling ducks and chickens staying well clear, such calm more like a whirlwind's vortex than any mere silence, he was something else again.

And before him stood, heads bent as supplicants, dressed for some reason now in rough black hooded robes, recognizable only by their feet, were the two Germans, stood like children pleading for a promised present, "Even though we have been bad, we didn't mean it and anyway it wasn't our fault," that message written in their every line even though she could not see their faces, nor in fact tear her eyes from his.

Slowly, slowly, as a snail laying its slime trail he spoke, indifferent as perfection, "What have we here? A clever girl? A clever, foolish girl? A girl who has not dared grow up? How sad she is, she makes us laugh."

The laugh was horrible, choked and phlegmy somehow as if coming out of decaying rotting creatures in a mine, and ending even more horribly because even less appropriately to the firm, upstanding, military-looking figure, in a high pitched girlish giggle.

The whole courtvard seemed to darken, as if blackness spilled from

him and overflowed steadily everywhere.

Dog, guide, Germans, the very air were silent . . . waiting . . . as if a huge storm must break.

Mariella, crushed as if an attempt at praising someone humbly or offering a small tawdry but months-saved-for gift had been rebuffed, waited too.

The figure looked at the guide lurking in the archway.

Just a look, but the guide slithered away into the shadows like a dog that knows it has done wrong, and punishment must come, but still by sufficient cringing hopes to somehow against hope save itself, all the

while terror making the prospective punishment the more dreadful the more it is delayed.

The dog followed, snarling, panting, belly down, turning to cringe and show wide-mouthed defiance at one and the same time, a combination unreal as the schizophrenia of a hound trying at one and the same time to deter an intruder and play with a child, yet made horrible by the overall smell of fear in its very demeanor.

Both vanished into the passageway.

The figure looked the three foreigners over, as if inspecting cheap-jack rubbish on a marketstall.

Mariella found herself holding her breath—and, irrelevantly, longing for a smoke yet not daring to light one as if the match would somehow turn to lightning and consume her on the spot.

She wanted to ask Emico, "Who is he?" or ask direct, but dare not break the spell.

"You do not know who I am . . . I am the Master . . . that is all you need to know," those words addressed directly to her.

Read in cold blood on a page she'd have thought them hysterically funny, such a claim, delivered so stiffly: not pompously, but with an utter certainty that was pomposity's darker twin: would have reduced her to gales of mirth.

Here, and seeming to come straight from a penetration into her mind like cold rays from a lizard's eye, or a hateful penetration of her body by Colin when she knew he merely wished to masturbate in her, hurried, perfunctory and thick-voiced in approach, it was overwhelming.

It seemed to blow open every door in her mind, leave all recesses open to the cold blast so that what the Master said next was imperishably written everywhere in her thoughts, all other concepts driven scurrying away before them like rats from a mill when the demolition men began their work.

"Yes, everything about you, in you, proves you do not really want to be changed into what you could be . . . you cannot, as these others wish and will, if we or those I speak for can agree a price, a due, shed your false self to be reborn and come true . . . there is no other you to be revealed, set free, because you are what you are already through and through . . . " Each word crashing into her senses, true, true, true . . .

"You are like a cracked cup waiting only always empty to be filled . . . and only can you be filled with dust, and then only when you become dust . . . you are so made one, so complete about the flaw to heal the flaw would only shatter you . . . you can be ruined, broken, but not healed . . .

"Now keep silence, speak no more till all is done... there is here now no other part for you but to be witness of what is to be, and to be done."

And turned from her as if she no longer existed, weighed in the balance and wanting . . .

Her response half relief, that the hawk's shadow had passed toward a fatter rabbit . . .

Half longing to shriek out, "But I exist too and do not want to . . . do to me what you must, destroy me, I will not be left out," like a spoiled child when others are noticed, or, more precise, like the neglected child's endless mute shape of long-ago stifled cry, as the favored brother and sister bask in the ray of parents' attention, never guessing, the poor ignored one, that after all they too are frail and limits exist to the amount of attention they can spare from themselves and their own incompleteness, suffering, to offer any child, any stranger, interruptor, so prefer to offer one enough and one nothing than offer two meals each leading in their smallness only to malnutrition . . .

All these thoughts, these forgivenesses passed through her brain—and the thought, too, that the Master, beginning now the movements, passes, raisings of smokes and killings of doves that began his business, that He, surely, at least of all those she had ever met should be full to overflowing, should not lack nor need to ration, set limit, to his terrible affection, that He at least should have time and destruction to spare for everyone . . .

And then the changes that the proceedings were designed, it seemed, to breed, really began . . .

And her mind darkened . . . Her mouth filled with a longing to retch, like the evil green swill-taste of too much cheap local wine at the so-called tasting they had been taken to, one raw white, its newness a source of pride not shame, and thin lifeless ham, each forced on her in never ending stream while fellow passengers in their eighties tried to dance and sing and Colin shrieking, cursed her for spoiling the camera film by taking the film out "in daylight," to see why it had jammed, which had seemed so natural to her at the time, and she had at last run out to be sick—and woken on the hotel bed thinking she was blind, only to find it was a power failure in the town . . .

And all the waiters seemed more sardonic than usual, a hidden well of laughter at these English who could not hold their liquor, who all had that evening picked at food and snarled among themselves, even the most ebullient silenced . . .

But even through Colin's unending nit-picking about the spoiled film, raw in her mind had been that instant's terror, the total blackness in which she'd stumbled to the sink to be sick again, no light on harbor or

over roofs or sky, only utter black, and the vast relief, stumbled to door and wrenching it open to scream, to see far down the corridor the flicker of a candle in one of the chambermaid's grasp, and know she had her sight, so that she could have kissed the woman.

Having of course no one to tell, afraid to show herself up to fellow tourists over such silly fear, old wives' tale, folk belief, that bad alcohol blinded you . . . and Colin too endlessly on about some amazing shot he'd reckoned he'd got of the whole town identically reflected upside down in the harbor, after hours waiting for perfect water conditions, stillness, tide, no boats, got up at dawn, too busy over this lamentation, enjoyed like most of his complaints, she was sure, as one more proof not just how she was the idiot, albatross, cross that held him back, the burden he must carry like Old Man of the Mountain on his back . . .

And all this merged . . . and was gone . . . and like a flashback the real memory of revelation came only, desperately fought off as if it had been memory of rape, as she came to herself running wildly like steeplechaser over low walls, hedges, brush, all scratched and skin raw and torn to shreds.

And shreds like the skin she passed off to him as from a fall, wishing almost instead they were wild lovebites of some winged, some clawing being . . . shreds too were the event, events, facts, legends, whatever they were, reshaping, shifting, twisting, as motes in eyes pressed onto a pillow seeking sleep or stopping tears . . .

Shreds that came went came . . . repeated . . . interlocked . . . randomly joined left conjoined again . . . like couples in some porno magazines she'd found once in her husband's private drawer at home, and looked at, sweating, legs heavy and faint as if up too fast in a lift . . . and never dared ask him about, knowing somehow he'd make her feel small over her curiosity, her ignorance of his schemes, ideas, intellect, plans, even such twistings as those of girls with girls, men with dogs, girls with goats, men with fatter men, would be part of his Plan, not mere vulgar gray-mac wanking pictures . . .

And the shreds left in her mind, the shreds of these events, mingled, blew in her mind all the way home, Home . . . like paper fragments twisting in the air above a bonfire went and came . . . went and came . . . the frame never clear and yet each fragment in its sharp as a knife as Time going by as children outgrowing her leaving only soil behind . . . "How could someone as big as you come out of someone as small as her?" one of the kids had asked once after they'd been to see her mother, their grandmother . . . somehow these memories too were much too large for

the soil in which they grew and came and spewed and could only be vomited disordered out, no table was large enough, no acreage of thought, to put them into tidy rows and make them into sense...

the evil green . . . the wine at the tasting the hotel staff arranged . . . white wine, yes but not white, raw, green, vomitous . . . the evil green of the thorned land she ran through . . . scrabbling, falling, ridden by fear as donkeys brayed contemptuous as if to say "Stop, wait, I'll come, I'll ride on you". . . child piggyback on mother growing weight . . . thorns, thorns . . . the prophet seemed to talk of the moon being a suburb of Earth and computers, though god knew how he knew what they were, thinking machines, these would come adopt his prophecies, they were better learners than her . . . and she shrunk under the whiplash of his teaching words . . .

shall we leave, avoid, evade, hide, cover as a grain of sand by a pearl the real memory of revelation, cried her mind . . . shall we find the children, tell them a story, play with starfish till they break, haggle for grapes, buy a drink . . . shall we get postcards, get cigarettes, see what the price of meat or Coke or an ice-cream is like compared to home, since that is the first thing the wives around the neighborhood will ask when we get back, after they get over their awe at us not being imprisoned eaten beaten by the Communists . . . shall we forget snake skin of after shed, the brother whizzed down the well, his sister eaten, smooth silver silver of reptile, a river, a lightning flash of river . . . a revelation, shall we forget it echoing across the bay, over the sign showing graphically stones falling off cliffs and slope one in five, echoing through the little streets of the town up the hill across the bay, over the water like a thunder of terror till dogs bark everywhere and even old black widow women leading donkeys and men asleep under their boats turn to look and Mariella's mind realizes it is she who has cried, cried in relief scrabbling back onto the road at last after rock-fields, Jerusalem throne-thorn walls . . . relief and greater fear that road, water, town, castle, too will turn and rend her, even hotel he turned and changed, even her husband have doubled his head, split into horns, grown three legs . . . shouted and woke familiar echo in hope her own voice somehow thrown forward back around allevs town walls hills would exercise the half-remembered half-blurred terrors and then on knees by a fallen branch of fir tearing madly at a cyclamen rooted in the rock praying genuinely praying that no one knew the hollowing crying that still re-echoed among the streets was the cry of this "mad Englishwoman" herself and then even now pulling one by one stones away from the roots of the cyclamen, deeper deeper, tearing fingers, nails, spoiling her skin, determined madly age

on age to get the plant out safe still flowering take it home a token tho she had to go down a yard to release it . . . and at last did . . . and with it clutched in an upturned fold of her blouse, clutched like a child this plant, feeling safe at last, safe though battered weary almost sexually overdrawn as if from a hysterectomy how a neighbor described it once, like the results of a night with too many men, she ran on . . . ran on . . .

mind a blur of half-buried church carved into ground . . . of bar blind, eyeless, its only door barred by flies and crates of sticky bottles and jeering mumbling faces . . . of shaved-head children playing soldiers and poking at some mangily huge white cat with sticks like bayonets . . . of one tractor, once painted red, mumbling and grumbling like a beast among beasts . . . of useless fearful villagers crossing themselves against some evil eye, pointing fingers at her as she ran by, longing to tell somebody her news as if it was a lucky win in a lottery or a change of Prime Minister or outbreak of war, but knowing no one could, would ever understand her . . . not here . . . not anywhere . . . not even back at home where they thought they spoke her language and she thought she spoke theirs . . .

rain . . . light then busy then a constant scurrying . . . and small blue butterflies, clouded, zooming round her as she briefly disordered sheltered . . . horrible to have them here near her, like eyes, spies, of what was up there in the Castle . . . watching eyes . . . and yet it would have been more horrible to be here alone . . .

Down, down the hill, the new road cut through old rock . . . the red rawness, the blurred growth defiantly returning to close the wound.

Could see now, ahead, the dried up channel of Venetian harbor where kids played football with a punctured beachball, a torn net . . . and wished instead of giving them the tiny plastic balls the ice-cream came in, after use, had bought them a real ball . . . only her and husband would laugh . . . no, worse, would say "You do what you like" in ways that made her feel worse still . . . still more a fool . . .

Behind her now miles, maybe, that tangle of blackthorn and rough pasture, that pre-Raphaelite dream land . . .

Fragments of the talk from that year, that castle yard, that sick romantic place where magic was ugly as a slum yard full of girls grown up too quick spitting swollen contraceptives from their teeth into the grass, and laughing with yellow spiteful teeth among the broken bottles . . .

Shreds like her torn skin she could not remember getting . . .

"How long does the gift take to act?"

"No longer than an aspirin on an empty stomach, my foolish faithless

modern children. No longer for you than for the least of these faithful

peasants."

Over the meeting, like angels, cherubs, over a mating far off flew bats, flies, maybe old jet planes, her son would have known if they were gnats, meteors, lightnings, what . . . far off, anyway, black specks only, feeders on corpses . . .

Back at the quay, the main waterfront of the town, and the lounging idlers, the black-cape crones, seemed another gauntlet . . . the hotel at last, and even the receptionist with her odd misplaced tooth, as Mariella gasped her longing for the key to the room, feeling trapped as if in treacle at the final gate of peace, seemed to laugh like a wind out of some ultimate vacuum . . .

She stumbled up to the room, and heedless of pains, threw herself face down on the bed, not even thinking an instant of cleaning herself up before her husband and children returned . . . as if it was too late for such pretense, such shame, that this once at least they would have to, her husband, see her, as she really was . . . a real being . . . someone would could be scared, could need . . . thoughts ago frightened her, fear of wrinkles, cancer biting between her legs in dreams, fatness, having to pass young drunks, teenagers at the bus stop as she went for her husband's cigarettes . . .

Surely, Mariella thought, her mind swept by waves of darkness like the onset of sleep, in turn each withdrawing to leave odd discoveries flotsam behind, surely she had a right to be afraid . . . and for him to know, to notice . . . if he wouldn't give her pat, affection, caress, at least let him give her boot, stone, anything, not just well-intended indifference . . . she was more surely than the background song on a juke-box in a pub you only notice when it's turned off, a TV talking to itself unnoticed in corner . . . a book to reread over and over, though even that he'd notice more . . .

well, tonight, here, when they returned, let them see her torn, bleeding, afraid . . . not fount of wisdom, healing, calm . . . someone who needed them . . . needed . . . let's see what they said then . . . as she told them, told them it all, not even putting the frightening bits, the obscene bits, into baby talk so the children wouldn't be frightened . . . her husband so full of theories, so enlightened as he thought, and daren't even talk to his own children about sex, went out of the room if anything came on the television about it, in case they might ask him questions, or said, "Shush, I'm listening to this" . . .

would he listen to this from her? Could she compete with his mind, his guidebook... his notes... would he listen as she told of the moment

of granting of wishes . . . the circle of obscene kisses . . . no way of knowing, was she excited, frightened, face into flesh, brown smell of dung, dry blow of dust, and tongue into her too behind . . . and the courtyard of the castle a farm, and they three animals in it, and the voice of the Masters calling them to be milked, slaughtered . . . fed . . .

The splitting of skins, a birth of real selves . . . born, borne of this . . . out of their shrunken selves into their . . . what . . . hopes, fears? she didn't dare to decide, know . . . the German boy a huge swift snake now, his sister a smooth white rat . . . running to each other as lovers in a Hollywood musical . . . snake eats rat, turns, looks at Mariella . . . god, did she dare tell her husband how she longed for it, him, to come for her too . . . it examined her, came nearer, nearer, bulging, coppery, glitter glorious as a window in York Cathedral . . . picked up her flesh in a great coil, as she relaxed, slack against such lovely coolness, longing for the huge faceted thing to enter her, eat her from all directions, from within, without . . .

Only it dropped her as if in contempt . . . and she wept at such rejection . . . and it swung swiftly as a bowstring bends and then releases over the low wall of the well and vanished downwards into darkness, fat, swollen, but so fluidly sweetly fine, no pregnant limping lump despite its huge meal, more a knife diving down entrails to split the world . . .

and from that same depth beneath the ground, where the Fall had been so deep there came back not splash but merely hissing silence, came the Keeper's voice, he who had vanished while the two animals he had made to their wish had met and merged . . . "As for you, girl . . . I have no gift for yooouuu. All you desire is emptiness and that is in your grasssp . . . " and the wind hissed and the two hollow human skins the German siblings had left behind danced like toy balloons half-deflated round the duts . . . pink, plastic looking, sacks for any deformed person, any hunchback with hump upon her stomach, and humpback with hunch to hide her fears, to crawl inside and conceal wounded mind in misdirectingly purloined letter obvious physical misshapenness . . .

soft rain, and blackness... and the run torn bleeding through sudden shallow ponds and dry ditches and thousands of red eyes on bushes and at last came this bed... this resting place... on which she lay like a storm down from the mountain seeking new victims, and instead lured to rest and flood like a breaking of belly water on an empty land, a waiting place...

and a long time later all her sobs even were done . . . and her breath at the end quiet . . .

and, moving slowly, carefully, so's not to spill any of this new found

tranquility, she washed, changed, hid scratches with make-up, powder, suntan oil, all that was needful...

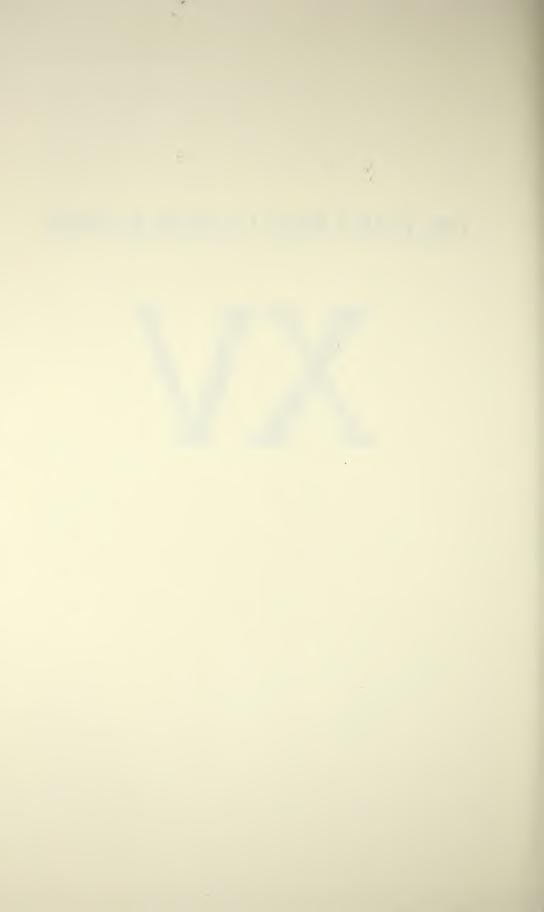
And unravaged, looking almost as a bride, faced husband and children when they at last reappeared . . .

Saying, "Colin, kids I'm glad you're back . . . did you have a nice day?"



# THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES





#### To Peter Straub

Remembering those fatal pints of bitter at Peter's Bar on Southampton Row.



## INTRODUCTION

#### What's in a Name?

THERE SEEMS to be a great deal of hair-splitting and hair-pulling in recent years over definitions and distinctions throughout the various genres and subgenres of science fiction and fantasy. The term "horror" seems to offend some readers and writers. The word tends to conjure grotesque and overplayed images and concepts. Outdated and unsubtle. Time for something new, more upscale. ("No, dear—I don't write horror. I write dark fantasy, don't you know.") Or maybe something with a harder edge to it. ("Piss off and die! I'm a New Wave writer!")

Maybe it's because "horror" tends to conjure forth mindless splatterfilms and schlock novels about giant maggots, but more likely it's because the term has always caused polite sniffs and raised eyebrows in polite society. Perhaps that's why the American pulp tradition (Weird Tales, Terror Tales, Horror Stories) popularized the designation "horror," while the English tradition favored the more genteel "ghost stories." But then, let's not forget that the "supernatural" story relies upon otherworldly forces, while the "terror" story depends upon direct physical threats. Of course, the "suspense" story has no fantastic element at all, and the "psychological" story relies upon all those submerged fears within our subconscious.

Then there's "contemporary horror"—never mind that *Dracula* was contemporary for its day. Or "New Wave horror"—forget that *Frankenstein* was avant garde in 1818. As for new trends toward explicit sex and gore, Matthew Gregory Lewis was already grossing out his readers in 1796 with *The Monk*. H.P. Lovecraft was defying the Establishment by introducing concepts of totally nonhuman forces of evil into his writing in the 1920s.

The point is that "horror" remains a convenient catch-all term for stories that, on one or more levels, create within us a sense of fear or unease. The props and orientation are not important, except as a matter of individual taste, so long as the overall effect upon the reader is a shiver—physically or emotionally, but best when there's both.

And so—welcome to Series XV of The Year's Best Horror, Terror, Uncanny, Shocking, Chilling, Unnerving, Supernatural, Ghostly, New Wave, Dark Fantasy Stories.

I've probably omitted a few labels there, but the truth is that we do have a diverse grouping with this year's selections. *Locus* estimated that some 200 horror stories were published during 1986, but I can assure you that their estimate is far too low—primarily due to the common appearance of horror fiction in nongenre publications and to the sudden upsurge of new small press publications devoted to horror.

I have edited the last eight volumes of *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, and 1986 has certainly been the most prolific year for horror fiction to date. So. Here they are: Eighteen of the best of the hundreds of horror stories published this past year. For about half of the authors, this is their first appearance ever in *The Year's Best Horror Stories*—a certain sign that the genre is anything but stagnant and incestuous. And there are some old hands here as well—some back after a long absence. Years of birth range from 1917 to 1963, with a number of writers turning up who were born in the 1950s. Another evidence that new blood is coming into the genre, but I'm not certain what to make of the high number of those with birthdays grouped in September.

As always, stories are selected without regard to an author's name or fame. There are no categories, taboos, or predetermined subgenres. Stories here include traditional and New Wave, ghostly and science fiction, psychological and gut-level, dark fantasy and loud fantasy—well, you get the idea.

These are horror stories—and they're the best.

Labels don't matter.

After all, blood by any other name would run as red.

—Karl Edward Wagner

### The Yougoslaves

#### Robert Bloch

"The Yougoslaves" marks a return to The Year's Best Horror Stories by Robert Bloch after too long an absence. The positive side of that one is that Bloch has been too busy with screenplays and novels in recent years to find time to spare for short fiction. Hard to complain, since Bloch excels in all three of these disciplines—but a pleasure to see him active once again in the short story genre.

Born in Chicago on April 5, 1917, Robert Bloch might have been America's foremost stand-up comedian had he not been inspired by exposure to The Phantom of the Opera and Weird Tales to become the dean of modern horror writers. Bent twig or teenage prodigy, Bloch saw his first story, "Lilies," published in the Winter 1934 issue of Marvel Tales and the following year his stories began to appear in Weird Tales Bloch's early fiction was heavily influenced by H.P. Lovecraft, and each author used the other as the doomed protagonist in a pair of linked stories. While the young Bloch was arguably the best of that circle of writers who sat about Lovecraft's throne, he quickly went on to develop his own concepts and directions within the horror genre. With the publication of his novel, The Scarf, in 1947, Bloch established himself as a master of psychological horror; his 1959 novel, Psycho, proved him to be The Master in this field. Bloch's nervewracking explorations of the mind of the psychotic killer have made him the most widely imitated writer in modern horror fiction. The other side of Bloch's writing is a macabre sense of humor, ranging from sardonic wit to horrendous puns. Humor and horror, he argues, are flip sides of the same coin—and it doesn't pay to argue with Robert Bloch.

Entering his sixth decade of writing, Bloch continues to be astonishingly prolific. Just as the new year begins, he is at work on a new novel; has just finished a new script for the television series, Tales from the Darkside; is awaiting publication shortly of two new collections, Lost in Time and Space with Lefty Feep and Midnight Pleasures; and is preparing two more collections and another novel or so. Regarding the following story, Bloch says: "It's based on a real-life experience of mine in Paris. Part of it is

fiction—but just which part will be up to the reader to decide."

I DIDN'T COME TO Paris for adventure.

Long experience has taught me there are no Phantoms in the Opera, no bearded artists hobbling through Montmartre on stunted legs, no straw-hatted *boulevardiers* singing the praises of a funny little honey of a Mimi.

The Paris of story and song, if it ever existed, is no more. Times have changed, and even the term "Gay Paree" now evokes what in theatrical parlance is called a bad laugh.

A visitor learns to change habits accordingly, and my hotel choice was a case in point. On previous trips I'd stayed at the Crillon or the Ritz; now, after a lengthy absence, I put up at the George V.

Let me repeat, I wasn't seeking adventure. That first evening I left the hotel for a short stroll merely to satisfy my curiosity about the city.

I had already discovered that some aspects of Paris remain immutable; the French still don't seem to understand how to communicate by telephone, and they can't make a good cup of coffee. But I had no need to use the phone and no craving for coffee, so these matters didn't concern me.

Nor was I greatly surprised to discover that April in Paris—Paris in the spring, tra-la-la—is apt to be cold and damp. Warmly-dressed for my little outing, I directed my footsteps to the archways of the Rue de Rivoli.

At first glance Paris by night upheld its traditions. All of the tourist attractions remained in place; the steel skeleton of the Eiffel Tower, the gaping maw of the Arch of Triumph, the spurting fountains achieving their miraculous transubstantiation of water into blood with the aid of crimson light.

But there were changes in the air—quite literally—the acrid odor of traffic fumes emanating from the exhausts of snarling sports cars and growling motor bikes racing along to the counterpoint of police and ambulance sirens. Gershwin's tinny taxi-horns would be lost in such din; I doubt if he'd approve, and I most certainly did not.

My disapproval extended to the clothing of local pedestrians. Young Parisian males now mimicked the youths of other cities; bare-headed, leather-jacketed, and blue-jeaned, they would look equally at home in Times Square on on Hollywood Boulevard. As for their female companions, this seemed to be the year when every girl in France decided to don atrociously-wrinkled patent leather boots which turned shapely lower limbs into the legs of elephantiasis victims. The *chic* Parisienne had

vanished, and above the traffic's tumult I fancied I could detect a sound of rumbling dismay as Napoleon turned over in his tomb.

I moved along under the arches, eyeing the lighted window displays of expensive jewelry mingled with cheap gimcracks. At least the Paris of tourism hadn't altered; there would still be sex shops in the Pigalle, and somewhere in the deep darkness of the Louvre the Mona Lisa smiled enigmatically at the antics of those who came to the city searching for adventure.

Again I say this was not my intention. Nonetheless, adventure sought me.

Adventure came on the run, darting out of a dark and deserted portion of the arcade just ahead, charging straight at me on a dozen legs.

It happened quickly. One moment I was alone; then suddenly and without warning, the children came. There were six of them, surrounding me like a small army—six dark-haired, swarthy-skinned urchins in dirty, disheveled garments, screeching and jabbbering at me in a foreign tongue. Some of them clutched at my clothing, others jabbed me in the ribs. Encircling me they clamored for a beggar's bounty, and as I fumbled for loose change one of them thrust a folded newspaper against my chest, another grabbed and kissed my free hand, yet another grasped my shoulder and whirled me around. Deafened by the din, dazed by their instant attack, I broke free.

In seconds, they scattered swiftly and silently, scampering into the shadows. As they disappeared I stood alone again, stunned and shaken. Then, as my hand rose instinctively to press against my inner breast pocket, I realized that my wallet had disappeared too.

My first reaction was shock. To think that I, a grown man, had been robbed on the public street by a band of little ragamuffins, less than ten years old!

It was an outrage, and now I met it with rage of my own. The sheer audacity of their attack provoked anger, and the thought of the consequences fueled my fury. Losing the money in the wallet wasn't important; he who steals my purse steals trash.

But there was something else I cherished; something secret and irreplaceable. I carried it in a billfold compartment for a purpose; after completing my sightseeing jaunt I'd intended to seek another destination and make use of the other item my wallet contained.

Now it was gone, and hope vanished with it.

But not entirely. The sound of distant sirens in the night served as a strident reminder that I still had a chance. There was, I remembered, a police station near the Place Vendome. The inconspicuous office was not

easy to locate on the darkened street beyond an open courtyard, but I managed.

Once inside, I anticipated a conversation with an *Inspecteur*, a return to the scene of the affair in the company of sympathetic *gendarmes* who were knowledgeable concerning such offenses and alert in ferreting out the hiding place of my assailants.

The young lady seated behind the window in the dingy outer office listened to my story without comment or a change of expression. Inserting forms and carbons in her typewriter, she took down a few vital statistics—my name, date of birth, place of origin, hotel address, and a short inventory of the stolen wallet's contents.

For reasons of my own I neglected to mention the one item that really mattered to me. I could be excused for omitting it in my excited state, and hoped to avoid the necessity of doing so unless the *Inspecteur* questioned me more closely.

But there was no interview with an *Inspecteur*, and no uniformed officer appeared. Instead I was merely handed a carbon copy of the *Recepisse de Declaration*; if anything could be learned about the fate of my wallet I would be notified at my hotel.

Scarcely ten minutes after entering the station I found myself back on the street with nothing to show for my trouble but a buff-colored copy of the report. Down at the very bottom, on a line identified in print as Mode Operatoire—Precisons Complementaires, was a typed sentence reading "Vol commis dans la Rue par de jeunes enfant yougoslaves."

"Yougoslaves?"

Back at the hotel I address the question to an elderly nightclerk. Sleepy eyes blinking into nervousness, he nodded knowingly.

"Ah!" he said. "The gypsies!"

"Gypsies? But these were only children—"

He nodded again. "Exactly so." And then he told me the story.

Pickpockets and purse-snatchers had always been a common nuisance here, but within the past few years their presence had escalated.

They came out of Eastern Europe, their exact origin unknown, but "yougoslaves" or "gypsies" served as a convenient label.

Apparently they were smuggled in by skillful and enterprising adult criminals who specialized in educating children in the art of thievery, very much as Fagin trained his youngsters in the London of Dickens' Oliver Twist.

But Fagin was an amateur compared to today's professors of pilfering. Their pupils—orphans, products of broken homes, or no homes at all—were recruited in foreign city streets, or even purchased outright

from greedy, uncaring parents. These little ones could be quite valuable; an innocent at the age of four or five became a seasoned veteran after a few years of experience, capable of bringing in as much as a hundred thousand American dollars over the course of a single year.

When I described the circumstances of my own encounter the clerk

shrugged.

"Of course. That is how they work, my friend—in gangs." Gangs, expertly adept in spotting potential victims, artfully instructed how to operate. Their seemingly spontaneous outcries were actually the product of long and exacting rehearsal, their apparently impromptu movements perfected in advance. They danced around me because they had been choreographed to do so. It was a bandits' ballet in which each one played an assigned role—to nudge, to gesture, to jab and jabber and create confusion. Even the hand-kissing was part of a master plan, and when one ragged waif thrust his folded newspaper against my chest it concealed another who ducked below and lifted my wallet. The entire performance was programmed down to the last detail.

I listened and shook my head. "Why don't the police tell me these

things? Surely they must know."

"Oui, M'sieur." The clerk permitted himself a confidential wink. "But perhaps they do not care." He leaned across the desk, his voice sinking to a murmur. "Some say an arrangement has been made. The yougoslaves are skilled in identifying tourists by their dress and manner. They can recognize a foreign visitor merely by the kind of shoes he wears. One supposes a bargain has been struck because it is only the tourists who are attacked, while ordinary citizens are spared."

I frowned. "Surely others like myself must lodge complaints. One

would think the police would be forced to take action."

The clerk's gesture was as eloquent as his words. "But what can they do? These yougoslaves strike quickly, without warning. They vanish before you realize what has happened, and no one knows where they go. And even if you managed to lay hands on one of them, what then? You bring this youngster to the police and tell your story, but the little ruffian has no wallet—you can be sure it was passed along immediately to another who ran off with the evidence. Also, your prisoner cannot speak or understand French, or at least pretends not to."

"So the gendarmes have nothing to go by but your words, and what can they do with the kid if they did have proof, when the law prohibits

the arrest and jailing of children under thirteen?

"It's all part of the scheme. And if you permit me, it is a beautiful scheme, this one."

My frown told him I lacked appreciation of beauty, and he quickly leaned back to a position of safety behind the desk, his voice and manner sobering. "Missing credit cards can be reported in the morning, though I think it unlikely anyone would be foolish enough to attempt using them with a forged signature. It's the money they were after."

"I have other funds in your safe," I said.

"Tres bien. In that case I advise you to make the best of things. Now that you know what to expect, I doubt if you will be victimized again. Just keep away from the tourist traps and avoid using the Metro." He offered me the solace of a smile which all desk clerks reserve for complaints about stalled elevators, lost luggage, faulty electrical fixtures, or clogged plumbing.

Then, when my frown remained fixed, his smile vanished. "Please, my friend! I understand this has been a most distressing occurrence, but I trust you will chalk it up to experience. Believe me, there is no point in pursuing the matter further."

I shook my head. "If the police won't go after these children—"

"Children?" Again his voice descended to a murmur. "Perhaps I did not make myself clear. The yougoslaves are not ordinary kids. As I say, they have been trained by masters. The kind of man who is capable of buying or stealing a child and corrupting it for a life of crime is not likely to stop there. I have heard certain rumors, *M'sieur*, rumors which make a dreadful sort of sense. These kids, they are hooked on drugs. They know every manner of vice but nothing of morals, and many carry knives, even guns. Some have been taught to break and enter into homes, and if discovered, to kill. Their masters, of course, are even more dangerous when crossed. I implore you, for your own safety—forget what has happened tonight and go on your way."

"Thank you for your advice." I managed a smile and went on my way. But I did not forget.

I did not forget what had happened, nor did I forget I'd been robbed of what was most precious to me.

Retiring to my room, I placed the *Do Not Disturb* sign on the outer doorknob and after certain makeshift arrangements I sank eventually into fitful slumber.

By the following evening I was ready; ready and waiting. Paris by night is the City of Light, but it is also the city of shadows. And it was in the shadows that I waited, the shadows under the archways of the Rue de Rivoli. My dark clothing was deliberately donned to blend inconspicuously with the background; I would be unnoticed if the predators returned to seek fresh prey.

Somehow I felt convinced that they would do so. As I stood against a pillar, scanning the occasional passerby who wandered past, I challenged myself to see the hunted through the eyes of the hunters.

Who would be the next victim? That party of Japanese deserved no more than a glance of dismissal; it wasn't wise to confront a group. By the same token, those who traveled in pairs or couples would be spared. And even the lone pedestrians were safe if they were able-bodied or dressed in garments which identified them as local citizens.

What the hunters sought was someone like myself, someone wearing clothing of foreign cut, preferably elderly and obviously alone. Someone like the gray-headed old gentleman who was approaching now, shuffling past a cluster of shops already closed for the night. He was short, slight of build, and his uncertain gait hinted at either a physical impairment or mild intoxication. A lone traveler on an otherwise-deserted stretch of street—he was the perfect target for attack.

And the attack came.

Out of the deep dark doorway to an arcade the yougoslaves danced forth, squealing and gesticulating, to suddenly surround their startled victim.

They ringed him, hands outstretched, their cries confusing, their fingers darting forth to prod and pry in rhythm with the outbursts.

I saw the pattern now, recognized the roles they played. Here was the hand-kisser, begging for bounty, here the duo tugging at each arm from the rear, here the biggest of the boys, brandishing the folded paper to thrust it against the oldster's chest while an accomplice burrowed into the gaping front of the jacket below. Just behind him the sixth and smallest of the band stood poised. The instant the wallet was snatched it would be passed to him, and while the others continued their distractions for a few moments more before scattering, he'd run off in safety.

The whole charade was brilliant in its sheer simplicity, cleverly contrived so that the poor old gentleman would never notice his loss until too late.

But I noticed—and I acted.

As the thieves closed in I stepped forward, quickly and quietly. Intent on their quarry, they were unaware of my approach. Moving up behind the youngster who waited to receive the wallet, I grasped his upraised arm in a tight grip, bending it back against his shoulderblade as I yanked him away into the shadows. He looked up and my free hand clamped across his oval mouth before he could cry out.

He tried to bite, but my fingers pressed his lips together. He tried to kick, but I twisted his bent arm and tugged him along offbalance, his feet

dragging over the pavement as we moved past the shadowy archway to the curb beyond.

My rental car was waiting there. Opening the door, I hurled him down onto the seat face-forward. Before he could turn I pulled the handcuffs from my pocket and snapped them shut over his wrists.

Locking the passenger door, I hastened around to the other side of the car and entered, sliding behind the wheel. Seconds later we were moving out into the traffic.

Hands confined behind him, my captive threshed helplessly beside me. He could scream now, and he did.

"Stop that!" I commanded. "No one can hear you with the windows closed."

After a moment he obeyed. As we turned off onto a side street he glared up at me, panting.

"Merde!" he gasped.

I smiled. "So you speak French, do you?"

There was no reply. But when the car turned again, entering one of the narrow alleyways off the Rue St. Roch, his eyes grew wary.

"Where are we going?"

"That is a question for you to answer."

"What do you mean?"

"You will be good enough to direct me to the place where I can find your friends."

"Go to hell!"

"Au contraire." I smiled again. "If you do not cooperate, and quickly, I'll knock you over the head and dump your body in the Seine."

"You old bastard—you can't scare me!"

Releasing my right hand from the steering wheel I gave him a clout across the mouth, knocking him back against the seat.

"That's a sample," I told him. "Next time I won't be so gentle." Clenching my fist, I raised my arm again, and he cringed.

"Tell me!" I said.

And he did.

The blow across the mouth seemed to have loosened his tongue, for he began to answer my questions as I reversed our course and crossed over a bridge which brought us to the Left Bank.

When he told me our destination and described it, I must confess I was surprised. The distance was much greater than I anticipated, and finding the place would not be easy, but I followed his directions on a mental map. Meanwhile I encouraged Bobo to speak.

That was his name—Bobo. If he had another he claimed he did not

know it, and I believed him. He was nine years old but he'd been with the gang for three of them, ever since their leader spirited him off the streets of Dubrovnik and brought him here to Paris on a long and illegal route while hidden in the back of a truck.

"Dubrovnik?" I nodded. "Then you really are a yougoslave. What about the others?"

"I don't know. They come from everywhere. Wherever he finds them." "Your leader? What's his name?"

"We call him Le Boss."

"He taught you how to steal like this?"

"He taught us many things." Bobo gave me a sidelong glance. "Listen to me, old man—if you find him there will be big trouble. Better to let me go."

"Not until I have my wallet."

"Wallet?" His eyes widened, then narrowed, and I realized that for the first time he'd recognized me as last night's victim. "If you think Le Boss will give you back your money, then you really are a fool."

"I'm not a fool. And I don't care about the money."

"Credit cards? Don't worry, Le Boss won't try to use them. Too risky."
"It's not the cards. There was something else. Didn't you see it?"

"I never touched your wallet. It was Pepe who took it to the van last night."

The van, I learned, was always parked just around the corner from the spot where the gang set up operations. And it was there that they fled after a robbery. Le Boss waited behind the wheel with the motor running; the stolen property was turned over to him immediately as they drove off to safer surroundings.

"So Le Boss has the wallet now," I said.

"Perhaps. Sometimes he takes the money out and throws the billfold away. But if there was more than money and cards inside as you say—" Bobo hesitated, peering up at me. "What is this thing you're looking for?"

"That is a matter I will discuss with Le Boss when I see him."

"Diamonds, maybe? You a smuggler?"

"No."

His eyes brightened and he nodded quickly. "Cocaine? Don't worry, I get some for you, no problem—good stuff, not the junk they cut for street trade. All you want, and cheap, too."

I shook my head. "Stop guessing. I talk only to Le Boss."

But Bobo continued to eye me as I guided the car out of the suburban residential and industrial areas, through a stretch of barren countryside, and into an unpaved side road bordering the empty lower reaches of the river. There were no lights here, no dwellings, no signs of life—only shadows, silence, and swaying trees.

Bobo was getting nervous, but now he forced a smile.

"Hey, old man—you like girls? Le Boss got one the other day."

"Not interested."

"I mean little girls. Fresh meat, only five, six maybe—"

I shook my head again and he sidled closer on the seat. "What about boys? I'm good, you'll see. Even Le Boss says so—"

He rubbed against me; his clothes were filthy and he smelled of sweat

and garlic. "Never mind," I said quickly, pushing him away.

"Okay," he murmured. "I figured if we did a deal you'd give up trying to see Le Boss. It's just going to make things bad for you, and there's no sense getting yourself hurt."

"I appreciate your concern." I smiled. "But it's not me you're really worried about. You'll be the one who gets hurt for bringing me, is that not so?"

He stared at me without replying but I read the answer in his fear-filled eyes.

"What will he do to you?" I said.

The fear spilled over into his voice. "Please, *M'sieur*—don't tell him how you got here! I will do anything you want, anything—"

"You'll do exactly what I say," I told him.

He glanced ahead, and again I read his eyes.

"Are we here?" I asked. "Is this the place?"

"Oui. But-"

"Be silent." I shut off the motor and headlights, but not before the beam betrayed a glimpse of the river bank beyond the rutted side road. Through the tangle of trees and rampant underbrush I could see the parked van hidden from sight amidst the sheltering shadows ahead. Beyond it, spanning the river, was a crude and ancient wooden foot bridge, the narrow and rotting relic of a bygone era.

I slipped out of the car, circling to the other side, then opened the passenger door and collared my captive.

"Where are they?" I whispered.

"On the other side." Bobo's voice was faint but the apprehension it held was strong. "Please don't make me take you there!"

"Shut up and come with me." I jerked him forward toward the trees, then halted as I stared across the rickety old makeshift bridge. The purpose it served in the past was long forgotten, and so was the huge oval on the far bank which opened close to the water's edge.

But Le Boss had not forgotten. Once this great circular conduit was

part of the earliest Paris sewer-system. Deep within its depths, dozens of connecting branches converged into a gigantic single outlet and spewed their waste into the water below. Now the interior channels had been sealed off, leaving the main tunnel dry but not deserted. For it was here, within a circle of metal perhaps twenty feet in diameter, that Le Boss found shelter from prying eyes, past the unused dirt road and the abandoned bridge.

The huge opening gaped like the mouth of Hell, and from within the

fires of Hell blazed forth.

Actually the fires were merely the product of candle light flickering from tapers set in niches around the base of the tunnel. I sensed that their value was not only practical but precautionary, for they would be quickly extinguished in the event of an alarm.

Alarm?

I tugged at Bobo's soiled collar. "The lookout," I murmured. "Where is he?"

Reluctantly the boy stabbed a finger in the direction of a tall and tangled weed bordering the side of the bridge. In the shadows I made out a small shape huddled amid surrounding clumps of vegetation.

"Sandor." My captive nodded. "He's asleep."

I glanced up. "What about Le Boss and the others?"

"Inside the sewer. Farther back, where nobody can see them."

"Good. You will go in now."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone." As I spoke I took out my key and unlocked the handcuffs, but my grip on Bobo's neck did not loosen.

He rubbed his chafed wrists. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Tell Le Boss that I grabbed you on the street, but you broke free and ran."

"How do I say I got here?"

"Perhaps you hitched a ride."

"And then—"

"You didn't know I was following you, not until I caught you here again. Tell him I'm waiting on this side of the river until you bring me my key. Once I get it I will go away—no questions asked, no harm done."

Bobo frowned. "Suppose he doesn't have the key?"

"He will," I said. "You see, it's just an old brass gate-key, but the handle is shaped into my family crest. Mounted in the crest is a large ruby."

Bobo's frown persisted. "What if he just pried it loose and threw the key away?"

"That's possible." I shrugged. "But you had better pray he didn't." My

fingers dug into his neck. "I want that key, understand? And I want it now."

"He's not going to give it to you, not Le Boss! Why should he?"

For answer I dragged him toward the sleeping sentry in the weeds. Reaching into my jacket I produced a knife. As Bobo gaped in surprise, I aimed a kick at the slumbering lookout. He blinked and sat up quickly, then froze as I pressed the tip of the broad blade against his neck.

"Tell him that if you don't bring me back the key in five minutes I'll cut Sandor's throat."

Sandor believed me, I know, because he started to whimper. And Bobo believed me too, for when I released my grip on his collar he started running toward the bridge.

Now there was only one question. Would Le Boss believe me?

I sincerely hoped so. But for the moment all I could do was be patient. Yanking the sniveling Sandor to his feet, I tugged him along to position myself at the edge of the bridge, staring across it as Bobo reached the mouth of the sewer on the other side. The mouth swallowed him; I stood waiting.

Except for the rasp of Sandor's hoarse breathing, the night was still. No sound emanated from the great oval of the sewer across the river, and my vision could not penetrate the flashing of flame from within.

But the reflection of the light served me as I studied my prisoner. Like Bobo, he had the body of a child, but the face peering up at me was incongruously aged—not by wrinkles but by the grim set of his cracked lips, the gaunt hollows beneath protruding cheekbones, and the sunken circles outlining the eyes above. The eyes were old, those deep dark eyes that had witnessed far more than any child should see. In them I read a present submissiveness, but that was merely surface reaction. Beyond it lay a cold cunning, a cruel craftiness governed not by intelligence but by animal instinct, fully developed, ready for release. And he was an animal, I told myself; a predator, dwelling in a cave, issuing forth to satisfy ageless atavistic hungers.

He hadn't been born that way, of course. It was Le Boss who transformed the innocence of childhood into amoral impulse, who eradicated humanity and brought forth the beast beneath.

Le Boss. What was he doing now? Surely Bobo had reached him by this time, told his tale. What was happening? I held Sandor close at knife-point, my eyes searching the swirl of firelight and shadow deep in the tunnel's iron maw.

Then, suddenly and shockingly, the metal mouth screamed.

The high, piercing echo rose only for an instant before fading into silence, but I knew its source.

Tightening my grip on Sandor's ragged collar and pressing the knife blade close to his throat, I started toward the foot bridge.

"No!" he quavered. "Don't—"

I ignored his panting plea, his futile efforts to free himself. Thrusting him forward, I crossed the swaying structure, averting my gaze from the dank depths beneath and focusing vision and purpose on the opening ahead.

Passing between the flame-tipped teeth of the candles on either side, I dragged Sandor down into the sewer's yawning throat. I was conscious of the odor now, the odor of carrion corruption which welled from the dark inner recesses, conscious of the clang of our footsteps against the rounded metal surface, but my attention was directed elsewhere.

A dark bundle of rags lay across the curved base of the tunnel. Skirting it as we approached, I saw I'd been mistaken. The rags were merely a covering, outlining the twisted form beneath.

Bobo had made a mistake too, for it was his body that sprawled motionless there. The grotesque angle of his neck and the splinter of bone protruding from an outflung arm indicated that he had fallen from above. Fallen, or perhaps been hurled.

My eyes sought the rounded ceiling of the sewer. It was, as I'd estimated, easily twenty feet high, but I didn't have to scan the top to confirm my guess as to Bobo's fate.

Just ahead, at the left of the rounded iron wall, was a wooden ladder propped against the side of a long, broad shelf mounted on makeshift scaffolding which rose perhaps a dozen feet from the sewer's base. Here the candles were affixed to poles at regular intervals, illuminating a vast humbled heap of hand luggage, rucksacks, attache cases, boxes, packages, purses, and moldy, mildewed articles of clothing, piled into a thieves' mountain of stolen goods.

And here, squatting before them on a soiled and aging mattress, amid a litter of emptied and discarded bottles, Le Boss squatted.

There was no doubt as to his identity; I recognized him by his mocking smile, the cool casualness with which he rose to confront me after I'd forced Sandor up the ladder and onto the platform.

The man who stood swaying before us was a monster. Forgive the term, but there is no other single word to describe him. Le Boss was well over six feet tall, and the legs enclosed in the dirt-smudged trousers of his soiled suit were bowed and bent by the sheer immensity of the burden they bore. He must have weighed over three hundred pounds, and the

fat bulging from his bloated belly and torso was almost obscene in its abundance. His huge hands terminated in fingers as thick as sausages.

There was no shirt beneath the tightly-stretched suit jacket and from a cord around his thick neck a whistle dangled against the naked chest. His head was bullet-shaped and bald. Indeed, he was completely hairless—no hint of eyebrows surmounted the hyperthyroid pupils, no lashes guarded the red-rimmed sockets. The porcine cheeks and sagging jowls were beardless, their fleshy folds worm-white even in the candle light which glittered against the tiny, tawny eyes.

I needed to second glance to confirm my suspicions of what had occurred before my arrival here; the scene I pictured in my mind was perfectly clear. The coming of Bobo, the breathless, stammered story, his master's reaction of mingled disbelief and anger, the fit of drunken fury in which the terrified bringer of bad tidings had been flung over the side of the platform to smash like an empty bottle on the floor or the sewer below—I saw it all too vividly.

Le Boss grinned at me, his fleshy lips parted to reveal yellowed stumps of rotting teeth.

"Well, old man?" he spoke in French, but his voice was oddly accented; he could indeed be a yougoslave.

I forced myself to meet his gaze. "You know why I'm here," I said.

He nodded. "Something about a key, I take it."

"Your pack of thieves took it. But it's my property."

His grin broadened. "My property now." The deep voice rumbled with mocking relish. "Suppose I'm not inclined to return it?"

For answer I shoved Sandor before me and raised the knife, poising it against his neck. My captive trembled and made mewing sounds as the blade pressed closer.

Le Boss shrugged. "You'll have to do better than that, old man. A child's life isn't important to me."

I peered down at Bobo's body lying below. "So I see." Striving to conceal my reaction, I faced him again. "But where are the others?"

"Playing, I imagine."

"Playing?"

"You find that strange, old man? In spite of what you may think, I'm not without compassion. After all, they are only children. They work hard, and they deserve the reward of play."

Le Boss turned, gesturing down toward the far recesses of the sewer. My eyes followed his gaze through the shifting candle glow, and for the first time I became aware of movement in the dim depths. Faint noises echoed upward, identifiable now as the sound of childish laughter. Tiny

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shapes moved below and beyond, shapes which gleamed white amid the shadows.

The yougoslaves were naked, and at play. I counted four of them,

scuffling and squatting in the far reaches of the tunnel.

But wait! There was a fifth figure, slightly smaller than the others who loomed over it and laughed as they pawed the squirming shape or tugged at the golden hair. Over their mirth rose the sound of sobbing, and over that, the echo of Bobo's voice.

Hey, old man—you like girls? Fresh meat, only five, six maybe—

Now I could see only too clearly. Two of the boys held their victim down, spread-eagled and helpless, while the other two—but I shall not describe what they were doing. •

Glancing away, I again met Le Boss' smile. Somehow it seemed more

hideous to me than the sight below.

He groped for a bottle propped against the pile of loot beside him and drank before speaking. "You are distressed, eh?"

I shook my head. "Not as much as you'll be unless you give me back my key."

He smiled. "Empty threats will get you nothing but empty hands."

"My hands aren't empty." I jabbed the knife at Sandor's neck, grazing the flesh, and he squealed in terror.

Le Boss shrugged. "Go ahead. I told you it doesn't matter to me."

For a moment I stood irresolute. Then, with a sigh I drew the knife back from Sandor's throat and released my hold on his sweat-soaked collar. He turned and raced off to the ladder behind me, and I could hear his feet scraping against the rungs as he descended. Mercifully, the sound muffled the laughter from below.

Le Boss nodded. "That's better. Now we can discuss the situation like gentlemen."

I lifted the knife. "Not as long as I have this, and you have the key." "More empty threats?"

"My knife speaks for me." I took a step forward as I spoke.

He chuckled. "I swear I don't know what to make of you, old man. Either you are very stupid or very brave."

"Both, perhaps." I raised the blade higher, but he halted my advance with a quick gesture.

"Enough," he wheezed. Turning, he stopped and thrust his pudgy hand into a tangle of scarves, kerchiefs, and handbags behind him. When he straightened again he was holding the key.

"Is this what you're after?"

"Yes. I knew you wouldn't discard it."

He stared at the red stone gleaming dully from the crested handle. "I never toss away valuables."

"Just human lives," I said.

"Don't preach to me, old man. I'm not interested in your philosophy."

"Nor I in yours." I stretched out my hand, palm upward. "All I want is my key."

His own hand drew back. "Not so fast. Suppose you tell me why."

"It's not the ruby," I answered. "Go ahead, pry it loose if you like."

Le Boss chuckled again. "A poor specimen—big enough, but flawed. It's the key itself that interests you, eh?"

"Naturally. As I told Bobo, it opens the gate to my estate."

"And just where is this estate of yours?"

"Near Bourg-la-Reine."

"That's not too far away." The little eyes narrowed. "The van could take us there within the hour."

"It would serve no purpose," I said. "Perhaps 'estate' is a misnomer. The place is small and holds nothing you'd be interested in. The furnishings are old, but hardly the quality of antiques. The house itself has been boarded up for years since my last visit. I have other properties elsewhere on the continent where I spend much of my time. But since I'll be here for several weeks on business, I prefer familiar surroundings."

"Other properties, eh?" Le Boss fingered the key. "You must be quite rich, old man."

"That's none of your affair."

"Perhaps not, but I was just thinking. If you have money, why not conduct your business in comfort from a hotel in Paris?"

I shrugged. "It's a matter of sentiment—"

"Really?" He eyed me sharply, and in the interval before speaking, I noted that the sounds below had ceased.

My voice broke the sudden silence. "I assure you—"

"Au contraire. You do not assure me in the least." Le Boss scowled. "If you do own an estate, then it's the key to the house that's important, not the one for the gate. Any locksmith could open it for you without the need of this particular key."

He squinted at the burnished brass, the dulled brilliance of the ruby imbedded in the ornate crest. "Unless, of course, it isn't a gate key after all. Looks to me more like the key to a strongbox, or even a room in the house holding hidden valuables."

"It's just a gate key." Again I held one hand out as the other gripped the knife. "But I want it—now."

"Enough to kill?" he challenged.

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"If necessary."

"I'll spare you that." Grinning, Le Boss reached down again into a bundle of discarded clothing. When he turned to face me again he held a revolver in his hand.

"Drop that toothpick," he said, raising the weapon to reinforce his command.

Sighing, I released my grip and the knife fell, clattering over the side of the open platform to the surface of the sewer below.

Impelled by blind impulse, I turned hastily. If I could get to the ladder—

"Stand where you are!"

It wasn't his words, but the sharp clicking sound that halted me. Slowly I pivoted to face the muzzle of his cocked revolver.

"That's better," he said.

"You wouldn't murder me—not in cold blood."

"Let's leave it up to the kids." As Le Boss spoke his free hand fumbled for the whistle looped around his neck. Enfolding it in blubbery lips, he blew.

The piercing blast echoed, reverberating from the rounded iron walls beside me and below. Then came the answering murmurs, the sudden thud of footsteps. Out of the corner of my eye I glanced down and saw the four naked figures—no, there were five now, including the fully clothed Sandor—moving toward the platform on which we stood.

Again I conjured up a vision of Hell, of demons dancing in the flames. But the flames were merely candle light and the bodies hurrying beneath were those of children. It was only their laughter which was demonic. Their laughter, and their gleefully contorted faces.

As they approached I caught a glimpse of what they held in their hands. Sandor had scooped up the knife from where it had fallen and the others held weapons of their own—a mallet, a wooden club, a length of steel pipe, the serrated stump of a broken wine bottle.

Le Boss chuckled once more. "Playtime," he said.

"Call them off!" I shouted. "I warn you—" He shook his head. "No way, old man."

Old man. That, I swear, is what did it. Not the menace of the gun, not the sight of the loathsome little creatures below. It was just the phrase, the contempt with which it had been repeated over and over again.

I knew what he was thinking—an unarmed, helpless elderly victim had been trapped for torment. And for the most part he was right. I was weaponless, old, trapped.

But not helpless.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated. There are subsonic whistles which make no audible sound, and there are ways of summoning which require no whistles at all. And there's more than human vermin infesting abandoned sewers, lurking in the far recesses of tangled tunnels, but responsive to certain commands.

Almost instantly that response came.

It came in the form of a purposeful padding, of faint noises magnified by sheer numbers. It came in the sound of squeaks and chittering, first as distant echoes, then in closer cacophony as my summons were answered.

Now the yougoslaves had reached the ladder at the far side of the platform. I saw Sandor mount the lower rungs, knife held between clenched teeth—saw him halt as he too heard the sudden, telltale tumult. Behind Sandor his companions turned to seek its source.

They cried out then, first in surprise, then in alarm, as the gray wave surged toward them along the sewer's length; the gray wave, flecked with hundreds of red and glaring eyes, a thousand tiny teeth.

The wave raced forward, curling around the feet and ankles of the yougoslaves before the ladder, climbing and clinging to their legs and knees. Screaming, they lashed out with their weapons, trying to beat back the attack but the wave poured on, forward and upward. Furry forms leaped higher, claws digging into waists, teeth biting into bellies. Sandor pulled himself up the ladder with both hands, but below him the red eyes rose and the gray shapes launched up from behind to cover his unprotected back with a blanket of wriggling bodies.

Now the screams from below were drowned out by the volume of shrill screeching. The knife dropped from between Sandor's lips as he shrieked and toppled down into the writhing mass that had already engulfed his companions. Flailing helplessly, their faces sank from sight in the rising waves of the gray sea.

It happened so quickly that Le Boss, caught by surprise, could only stare in stunned silence at the shambles below.

It was I whose voice rose above the bedlam. "The key," I cried. "Give me the key."

For answer he raised his hand—not the one holding the key, but the one grasping the gun.

His fingers were trembling, and the muzzle wavered as I started toward him. Even so, at such close range I realized he couldn't miss. And he didn't.

As he squeezed the trigger the shots came in rapid succession. They

were barely audible in the uproar from the tunnel, but I felt their impact as they struck my chest and torso.

I kept on, moving closer, hearing the final, futile click as he continued to press the trigger of his emptied revolver. Looking up, eyes red with rage, he hurled the weapon at my head. It whizzed past me, and now he had nothing left to clutch but the key. His hands started to shake.

My hand went out.

Snatching the key from his pudgy paw, I stared at his frantic face. Perhaps I should have told him he'd guessed correctly, the key was not meant to open a gate. I could have explained the ruby in the crest—the symbol of a lineage so ancient that it still adhered to the old custom of maintaining a tomb on the estate. The key gave me access to that tomb, not that it was really needed; my branch of the line had other resting places, and during my travels I always carried with me what was necessary to afford temporary rest of my own. But during my stay here the tomb was both practical and private. Calling a locksmith would be unwise and inconvenient, and I do not relish inconvenience.

All this I could have told him, and much more. Instead I pocketed the key bearing the great flawed ruby that was like a single drop of blood.

As I did so, I realized that the squeals and chittering below had faded into other sounds compounded of claws ripping through cloth, teeth grating against bone.

Unable to speak, unable to move, Le Boss awaited my approach. When I gripped his shoulders he must have fainted, for there was only a dead weight now to ease down onto the platform floor.

Below me my brothers sated their hunger, feasting on the bodies of the yougoslaves.

Bending forward to the fat neck beneath me, in my own way I feasted too.

What fools they were, these creatures who thought themselves so clever! Perhaps they could outwit others, but their little tricks could not prevail against me. After all, they were only yougoslaves.

And I am a Transylvanian.



# Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man's Back

### Joe R. Lansdale

Born in Gladewater, Texas in 1951, Joe R. Lansdale is one of a group of popular writers for small press publications who are beginning to stake a claim in professional ranks. Currently a resident of Nacogdoches, Texas, Lansdale says that he managed two years of college over about four years in three different schools, including the University of Texas at Austin, and that he has been a martial artist, farmer, factory worker, janitor, and worked at numerous other of the sort of odd jobs determined writers seem to bounce through. Since 1981, Lansdale has been writing full time, and he is now editing anthologies as well. He has sold over a hundred short stories, and his books include Act of Love, Dead in the West, The Magic Wagon, Nightrunners, The Drive-in, and a collection of his short fiction. His anthologies include Best of the West, an as-yet-untitled offbeat Western anthology, and Wild West Show.

"Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man's Back" was first published in the John Maclay anthology, Nukes. Joe R. Lansdale is also noted for his use of humor in his stories and articles, but you won't believe that after reading the following work.

#### FROM THE JOURNAL OF PAUL MARDER

(Воом!)

That's a little scientist joke, and the proper way to begin this. As for the purpose of this notebook, I'm uncertain. Perhaps to organize my thoughts and not go insane.

No. Probably so I can read it and feel as if I'm being spoken to. Maybe neither of those reasons. It doesn't matter. I just want to do it, and that is enough.

What's new?

Well, Mr. Journal, after all these years I've taken up martial arts again—or at least the forms and calisthenics of Tae Kwon Do. There is no one to spar with here in the lighthouse, so the forms have to do.

There is Mary, of course, but she keeps all her sparring verbal. And as of late, there is not even that. I long for her to call me a sonofabitch. Anything. Her hatred of me has cured to 100% perfection and she no longer finds it necessary to speak. The tight lines around her eyes and mouth, the emotional heat that radiates from her body like a dreadful cold sore looking for a place to lie down is voice enough for her. She lives only for the moment when she (the cold sore) can attach herself to me with her needles, ink and thread. She lives only for the design on my back.

That's all I live for as well. Mary adds to it nightly and I enjoy the pain. The tattoo is if a great, blue mushroom cloud, and in the cloud, etched ghostlike, is the face of our daughter, Rae. Her lips are drawn tight, eyes are closed and there are stitches deeply pulled to simulate the lashes. When I move fast and hard they rip slightly and Raw cries bloody tears.

That's one reason for the martial arts. The hard practice of them helps me to tear the stitches so my daughter can cry. Tears are the only thing I can give her.

Each night I bare my back eagerly to Mary and her needles. She pokes deep and I moan in pain as she moans in ecstasy and hatred. She adds more color to the design, works with brutal precision to bring Rae's face out in sharper relief. After ten minutes she tires and will work no more. She puts the tools away and I go to the full-length mirror on the wall. The lantern on the shelf flickers like a jack-o-lantern in a high wind, but there is enough light for me to look over my shoulder and examine the tattoo. And it is beautiful. Better each night as Rae's face becomes more and more defined.

Rae.

Rae. God, can you forgive me, sweetheart?

But the pain of the needles, wonderful and cleansing as they are, is not enough. So I go sliding, kicking and punching along the walkway around the lighthouse, feeling Rae's red tears running down my spine, gathering in the wasteband of my much-stained canvas pants.

Winded, unable to punch and kick anymore, I walk over to the railing and call down into the dark, "Hungry?"

In response to my voice a chorus of moans rises up to greet me.

Later, I lie on my pallet, hands behind my head, examine the ceiling and try to think of something worthy to write in you, Mr. Journal. So seldom is there anything. Nothing seems truly worthwhile.

Bored of this, I roll on my side and look at the great light that once shone out to the ships, but is now forever snuffed. Then I turn the other direction and look at my wife sleeping on her bunk, her naked ass turned toward me. I try to remember what it was like to make love to her, but it is difficult. I only remember that I miss it. For a long moment I stare at my wife's ass as if it is a mean mouth about to open and reveal teeth. Then I roll on my back again, stare at the ceiling, and continue this routine until daybreak.

Mornings I greet the flowers, their bright red and yellow blooms bursting from the heads of long-dead bodies that will not rot. The flowers open wide to reveal their little black brains and their feathery feelers, and they lift their blooms upward and moan. I get a wild pleasure out of this. For one crazed moment I feel like a rock singer appearing before his starry-eyed audience.

When I tire of the game I get the binoculars, Mr. Journal, and examine the eastern plains with them, as if I expect a city to materialize there. The most interesting thing I have seen on those plains is a herd of large lizards thundering north. For a moment, I considered calling Mary to see them, but I didn't. The sound of my voice, the sight of my face, upsets her. She loves only the tattoo and is interested in nothing more.

When I finish looking at the plains, I walk to the other side. To the west, where the ocean was, there is now nothing but miles and miles of cracked, black sea bottom. Its only resemblances to a great body of water are the occasional dust storms that blow out of the west like dark tidal waves and wash the windows black at midday. And the creatures. Mostly mutated whales. Monstrously large, sluggish things. Abundant now where once they were near extinction. (Perhaps the whales should form some sort of GREENPEACE organization for humans now. What do you think, Mr. Journal? No need to answer. Just another one of those little scientist jokes.)

These whales crawl across the sea bottom near the lighthouse from time to time, and if the mood strikes them, they rise on their tails and push their heads near the tower and examine it. I keep expecting one to flop down on us, crushing us like bugs. But no such luck. For some unknown reason the whales never leave the cracked sea bed to venture onto what we formerly called the shore. It's as if they live in invisible water and are bound by it. A racial memory perhaps. Or maybe there's something in that cracked black soil they need. I don't know.

Besides the whales I suppose I should mention I saw a shark once. It was slithering along at a great distance and the tip of its fin was winking in the sunlight. I've also seen some strange, legged fish and some things I could not put a name to. I'll just call them whale food since I saw one of the whales dragging his bottom jaw along the ground one day, scooping up the creatures as they tried to beat a hasty retreat.

Exciting, huh? Well, that's how I spend my day, Mr. Journal. Roaming about the tower with my glasses, coming in to write in you, waiting anxiously for Mary to take told of that kit and give me the signal. The mere thought of it excites me to erection. I suppose you could call that our sex act together.

And what was I doing the day they dropped The Big One? Glad you asked that, Mr. Journal, really I am.

I was doing the usual. Up at six, did the shit, shower and shave routine. Had breakfast. Got dressed. Tied my tie. I remember doing the latter, and not very well, in front of the bedroom mirror, and noticing that I had shaved poorly. A hunk of dark beard decorated my chin like a bruise.

Rushing to the bathroom to remedy that, I opened the door as Rae, naked as the day of her birth, was stepping from the tub.

Surprised, she turned to look at me. An arm went over her breasts, and a hand, like a dove settling into a fiery bush, covered her pubic area.

Embarrassed, I closed the door with an "excuse me" and went about my business—unshaved. It was an innocent thing. An accident. Nothing sexual. But when I think of her now, more often than not, that is the first image that comes to mind. I guess it was the moment I realized my baby had grown into a beautiful woman.

That was also the day she went off to her first day of college and got to see, ever so briefly, the end of the world.

And it was the day the triangle—Mary, Rae and myself—shattered.

If my first memory of Rae alone is that day, naked in the bathroom, my foremost memory of us as a family is when Rae was six. We used to go to the park and she would ride the merry-go-round, swing, teeter-totter, and finally my back. ("I want to piggy, Daddy.") We would gallop about until my legs were rubber, then we would stop at the bench where Mary sat waiting. I would turn my back to the bench so Mary could take Rae down, but always before she did, she would reach around from behind, caressing Rae, pushing her tight against my back, and Mary's hands would touch my chest.

God, but if I could describe those hands. She still has hands like that, after all these years. I feel them fluttering against my back when she works. They are long and sleek and artistic. Naturally soft, like the belly of a baby rabbit. And when she held Rae and me that way, I felt that no matter what happened in the world, we three could stand against it and conquer.

But now the triangle is broken and the geometry gone away. So the day Rae went off to college and was fucked into oblivion by the dark, pelvic thrust of the bomb, Mary drove me to work. Me, Paul Marder, big shot with The Crew. One of the finest, brightest young minds in the industry. Always teaching, inventing and improving on our nuclear threat, because, as we often joked, "We cared enough to send only the very best."

When we arrived at the guard booth, I had out my pass, but there was no one to take it. Beyond the chain-link gate there was a wild melee of

people running, screaming, falling down.

I got out of the car and ran to the gate. I called out to a man I knew as he ran by. When he turned his eyes were wild and his lips were flecked with foam. "The missiles are flying," he said, then he was gone, running madly.

I jumped in the car, pushed Mary aside and stomped the gas. The Buick leaped into the fence, knocking it asunder. The car spun, slammed into the edge of a building and went dead. I grabbed Mary's hand, pulled her from the car and we ran toward the great elevators. We made one just in time. There were others running for it as the door closed, and the elevator went down. I still remember the echo of their fists on the metal just as it began to drop. It was like the rapid heartbeat of something dying.

And so the elevator took us to the world of Down Under and we locked it off. There we were in a five-mile layered city designed not only as a massive office and laboratory, but as an impenetrable shelter. It was our special reward for creating the poisons of war. There was food, water, medical supplies, films, books, you name it. Enough to last two thousand people for a hundred years. Of the two thousand it was designed for, perhaps eleven hundred made it. The others didn't run fast enough from the parking lot or the other buildings, or they were late for work, or maybe they had called in sick.

Perhaps they were the lucky ones. They might have died in their sleep. Or while they were having a morning quickie with the spouse. Or perhaps

as they lingered over that last cup of coffee.

Because you see, Mr. Journal, Down Under was no paradise. Before long suicides were epidemic. I considered it myself from time to time. People slashed their throats, drank acid, took pills. It was not unusual to come out of your cubicle in the morning and find people dangling from pipes and rafters like ripe fruit.

There were also the murders. Most of them performed by a crazed group who lived in the deeper recesses of the unit and called themselves the Shit Faces. From time to time they smeared dung on themselves and

ran amok, clubbing men, women, and children born Down Under, to death. It was rumored they ate human flesh.

We had a police force of sorts, but it didn't do much. It didn't have much sense of authority. Worse, we all viewed ourselves as deserving victims. Except for Mary, we had all helped to blow up the world.

Mary came to hate me. She came to the conclusion I had killed Rae. It was a realization that grew in her like a drip growing and growing until it became a gushing flood of hate. She seldom talked to me. She tacked up a picture of Rae and looked at it most of the time.

Topside she had been an artist, and she took that up again. She rigged a kit of tools and inks and became a tattooist. Everyone came to her for a mark. And though each was different, they all seemed to indicate one things I finds due. I blow up the world. Brand me

thing: I fucked up. I blew up the world. Brand me.

Day in and day out she did her tattoos, having less and less to do with me, pushing herself more and more into this work until she was as skilled with skin and needles as she had been Topside with brush and canvas. And one night, as we lay on our separate pallets, feigning sleep, she said to me, "I just want you to know how much I hate you."

"I know," I said.

"You killed Rae."

"I know."

"You say you killed her, you bastard. Say it."

"I killed her," I said, and meant it.

Next day I asked for my tattoo. I told her of this dream that came to me nightly. There would be darkness, and out of this darkness would come a swirl of glowing clouds, and the clouds would meld into a mushroom shape, and out of that—torpedo-shaped, nose pointing skyward, striding on ridiculous cartoon legs—would step The Bomb.

There was a face painted on The Bomb, and it was my face. And suddenly the dream's point of view would change, and I would be looking out of the eyes of that painted face. Before me was my daughter. Naked. Lying on the ground. Her legs wide apart. Her sex glazed like a wet canyon.

And I/The Bomb, would dive into her, pulling those silly feet after me, and she would scream. I could hear it echo as I plunged through her belly, finally driving myself out of the top of her head, then blowing to terminal orgasm. And the dream would end where it began. A mushroom cloud. Darkness.

When I told Mary the dream and asked her to interpret it in her art, she said, "Bare your back," and that's how the design began. An inch of work at a time—a painful inch. She made sure of that.

Never once did I complain. She'd send the needles home as hard and deep as she could, and though I might moan or cry out, I never asked her to stop. I could feel those fine hands touching my back and I loved it. The needles. The hands.

And if that was so much fun, you ask, why did I come Topside?

You ask such probing questions, Mr. Journal. Really you do, and I'm glad you asked that. My telling you will be like a laxative, I hope. Maybe if I just let the shit flow I'll wake up tomorrow and feel a lot better about myself.

Sure. And it will be the dawning of a new Pepsi generation as well. It will have all been a bad dream. The alarm clock will ring, I'll get up, have my bowl of Rice Krispies and tie my tie.

Okay, Mr. Journal. The answer. Twenty years or so after we went Down Under, a fistful of us decided it couldn't be any worse Topside than it was below. We made plans to go see. Simple as that. Mary and I even talked a little. We both entertained the crazed belief that Raw might have survived. She would be thirty-eight. We might have been hiding below like vermin for no reason. It could be a brave new world up there.

I remember thinking these things, Mr. Journal, and half-believing them.

We outfitted two sixty-foot crafts that were used as part of our transportation system Down Under, plugged in the half-remembered codes that opened the elevators, and drove the vehicles inside. The elevator lasers cut through the debris above them and before long we were Topside. The doors opened to sunlight muted by gray-green clouds and a desertlike landscape. Immediately I knew there was no brave new world over the horizon. It had all gone to hell in a fiery handbasket, and all that was left of man's millions of years of development were a few pathetic humans living Down Under like worms, and a few others crawling Topside like the same.

We cruised about a week and finally came to what had once been the Pacific Ocean. Only there wasn't any water now, just that cracked blackness.

We drove along the shore for another week and finally saw life. A whale. Jacobs immediately got the idea to shoot one and taste its meat.

Using a high-powered rifle he killed it, and he and seven others cut slabs off it, brought the meat back to cook. They invited all of us to eat, but the meat looked greenish and there wasn't much blood and we warned him against it. But Jacobs and the others ate it anyway. As Jacobs said, "It's something to do."

A little later on Jacobs threw up blood and his intestines boiled out of his mouth, and not long after those who had shared the meat had the same thing happen to them. They died crawling on their bellies like gutted dogs. There wasn't a thing we could do for them. We couldn't even bury them. The ground was too hard. We stacked them like cordwood along the shoreline and moved camp down a way, tried to remember how remorse felt.

And that night, while we slept as best we could, the roses came.

Now, let me admit, Mr. Journal, I do not actually know how the roses survive, but I have an idea. And since you've agreed to hear my story—and even if you haven't, you're going to anyway—I'm going to put logic and fantasy together and hope to arrive at the truth.

These roses lived in the ocean bed, underground, and at night they came out. Up until then they had survived as parasites of reptiles and animals, but a new food had arrived from Down Under. Humans. Their creators, actually. Looking at it that way, you might say we were the gods who conceived them, and their partaking of our flesh and blood was but a new version of wine and wafer.

I can imagine the pulsating brains pushing up through the sea bottom on thick stalks, extending feathery feelers and tasting the air out there beneath the light of the moon—which through those odd clouds gave the impression of a pus-filled boil—and I can imagine them uprooting and dragging their vines across the ground toward the shore where the corpses lay.

Thick vines sprouted little, thorny vines, and these moved up the bank and touched the corpses. Then, with a lashing motion, the thorns tore into the flesh, and the vines, like snakes, slithered through the wounds and inside. Secreting a dissolving fluid that turned the innards to the consistency of watery oatmeal, they slurped up the mess, and the vines grew and grew at amazing speed, moved and coiled throughout the bodies, replacing nerves and shaping into the symmetry of the muscles they had devoured, and lastly they pushed up through the necks, into the skulls, ate tongues and eyeballs and sucked up the mouse-gray brains like soggy gruel. With an explosion of skull shrapnel, the roses bloomed, their tooth-hard petals expanding into beautiful red and yellow flowers, hunks of human heads dangling from them like shattered watermelon rinds.

In the center of these blooms a fresh, black brain pulsed and feathery feelers once again tasted air for food and breeding grounds. Energy waves from the floral brains shot through the miles and miles of vines

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that were knotted inside the bodies, and as they had replaced nerves, muscles and vital organs, they made the bodies stand. Then those corpses turned their flowered heads toward the tents where we slept, and the blooming corpses (another little scientist joke there if you're into English idiom, Mr. Journal) walked, eager to add the rest of us to their animated bouquet.

I saw my first rose-head while I was taking a leak.

I had left the tent and gone down by the shoreline to relieve myself, when I caught sight of it out of the corner of my eye. Because of the bloom I first thought it was Susan Myers. She wore a thick, wooly Afro that surrounded her head like a lion's mane, and the shape of the thing struck me as her silhouette. But when I zipped and turned, it wasn't an Afro. It was a flower blooming out of Jacobs. I recognized him by his clothes and the hunk of his face that hung off one of the petals like a worn-out hat on a peg.

In the center of the blood-red flower was a pulsating sack, and all around it little wormy things squirmed. Directly below the brain was a thin proboscis. It extended toward me like an erect penis. At its tip, just inside the opening, were a number of large thorns.

A sound like a moan came out of that proboscis, and I stumbled back. Jacobs' body quivered briefly, as if he had been besieged by a sudden chill, and ripping through his flesh and clothes, from neck to foot, was a mass of thorny, wagging vines that shot out to five feet in length.

With an almost invisible motion, they waved from west to east, slashed my clothes, tore my hide, knocked my feet out from beneath me. It was like being hit by a cat-o-nine-tails.

Dazed, I rolled onto my hands and knees, bear-walked away from it. The vines whipped against my back and butt, cut deep.

Every time I got to my feet, they tripped me. The thorns not only cut, they burned like hot ice picks. I finally twisted away from a net of vines, slammed through one last shoot, and made a break for it.

Without realizing it, I was running back to the tent. My body felt as if I had been lying on a bed of nails and razor blades. My forearm hurt something terrible where I had used it to lash the thorns away from me. I glanced down at it as I ran. It was covered in blood. A strand of vine about two feet in length was coiled around it like a garter snake. A thorn had torn a deep wound in my arm, and the vine was sliding an end into the wound.

Screaming, I held my forearm in front of me like I had just discovered it. The flesh, where the vine had entered, rippled and made a bulge that

looked like a junkie's favorite vein. The pain was nauseating. I snatched at the vine, ripped it free. The thorns turned against me like fishhooks.

The pain was so much I fell to my knees, but I had the vine out of me. It squirmed in my hand, and I felt a thorn gouge my palm. I threw the vine into the dark. Then I was up and running for the tent again.

The roses must have been at work for quite some time before I saw Jacobs, because when I broke back into camp yelling, I saw Susan, Ralph, Casey and some others, and already their heads were blooming, skulls cracking away like broken model kits.

Jane Calloway was facing a rose-possessed corpse, and the dead body had its hands on her shoulders, and the vines were jetting out of the corpse, weaving around her like a web, tearing, sliding inside her, breaking off. The proboscis poked into her mouth and extended down her throat, forced her head back. The scream she started came out a gurgle.

I tried to help her, but when I got close, the vines whipped at me and I had to jump back. I looked for something to grab, to hit the damn thing with, but there was nothing. When next I looked at Jane, vines were stabbing out of her eyes and her tongue, now nothing more than lava-thick blood, was dripping out of her mouth onto her breasts, which, like the rest of her body, were riddled with stabbing vines.

I ran away then. There was nothing I could do for Jane. I saw others embraced by corpse hands and tangles of vines, but now my only thought was Mary. Our tent was to the rear of the campsite, and I ran there as fast as I could.

She was lumbering out of our tent when I arrived. The sound of screams had awakened her. When she saw me running she froze. By the time I got to her, two vine-riddled corpses were coming upon the tent from the left side. Grabbing her hand I half pulled, half dragged her away from there. I got to one of the vehicles and pushed her inside.

I locked the doors just as Jacobs, Susan, Jane, and others appeared at the windshield, leaning over the rocket-nose hood, the feelers around the brain sacks vibrating like streamers in a high wind. Hands slid greasily down the windshield. Vines flopped and scratched and cracked against it like thin bicycle chains.

I got the vehicle started, stomped the accelerator, and the rose-heads went flying. One of them, Jacobs, bounced over the hood and splattered into a spray of flesh, ichor and petals.

I had never driven the vehicle, so my maneuvering was rusty. But it didn't matter. There wasn't exactly a traffic rush to worry about.

After an hour or so, I turned to look at Mary. She was staring at me,

her eyes like the twin barrels of a double-barreled shotgun. They seemed to say, "More of your doing," and in a way she was right. I drove on.

Daybreak we came to the lighthouse. I don't know how it survived. One of those quirks. Even the glass was unbroken. It looked like a great stone finger shooting us the bird.

The vehicle's tank was near empty, so I assumed here was as good a place to stop as any. At least there was shelter, something we could fortify. Going on until the vehicle was empty of fuel didn't make much sense. There wouldn't be any more fill-ups, and there might not be any more shelter like this.

Mary and I (in our usual silence) unloaded the supplies from the vehicle and put them in the lighthouse. There was enough food, water, chemicals for the chemical toilet, odds and ends, extra clothes, to last us a year. There were also some guns. A Colt .45 revolver, two twelve-gauge shotguns and a .38, and enough shells to fight a small war.

When everything was unloaded, I found some old furniture downstairs, and using tools from the vehicles, tried to barricade the bottom door and the one at the top of the stairs. When I finished, I thought of a line from a story I had once read, a line that always disturbed me. It went something like, "Now we're shut in for the night."

Days. Nights. All the same. Shut in with one another, our memories and the fine tattoo.

A few days later I spotted the roses. It was as if they had smelled us out. And maybe they had. From a distance, through the binoculars, they reminded me of old women in bright sun hats.

It took them the rest of the day to reach the lighthouse, and they immediately surrounded it, and when I appeared at the railing they would lift their heads and moan.

And that, Mr. Journal, brings us up to now.

I thought I had written myself out, Mr. Journal. Told the only part of my life story I would ever tell, but now I'm back. You can't keep a good world destroyer down.

I saw my daughter last night and she's been dead for years. But I saw her, I did, naked, smiling at me, calling to ride piggyback.

Here's what happened.

It was cold last night. Must be getting along winter. I had rolled off my pallet onto the cold floor. Maybe that's what brought me awake. The cold. Or maybe it was just gut instinct.

It had been a particularly wonderful night with the tattoo. The face had been made so clear it seemed to stand out from my back. It had finally become more defined than the mushroom cloud. The needles went in hard and deep, but I've had them in me so much now I barely feel the pain. After looking in the mirror at the beauty of the design, I went to bed happy, or as happy as I can get.

During the night the eyes ripped open. The stitches came out and I didn't know it until I tried to rise from the cold, stone floor and my back

puckered against it where the blood had dried.

I pulled myself free and got up. It was dark, but we had a good moonspill that night and I went to the mirror to look. It was bright enough that I could see Rae's reflection clearly, the color of her face, the color of the cloud. The stitches had fallen away and now the wounds were spread wide, and inside the wounds were eyes. Oh God, Rae's blue eves. Her mouth smiled at me and her teeth were very white.

Oh, I hear you, Mr. Journal. I hear what you're saying. And I thought of that. My first impression was that I was about six bricks shy a load, gone around the old bend. But I know better now. You see, I lit a candle and held it over my shoulder, and with the candle and the moonlight, I could see even more clearly. It was Rae all right, not just a tattoo.

I looked over at my wife on the bunk, her back to me, as always. She had not moved.

I turned back to the reflection. I could hardly see the outline of myself, just Rae's face smiling out of that cloud.

"Rae," I whispered, "is that you?"

"Come on, Daddy," said the mouth in the mirror, "that's a stupid question. Of course, it's me."

"But . . . You're . . . you're . . . "

"Dead?"

"Yes . . . Did . . . did it hurt much?"

She cackled so loudly the mirror shook. I could feel the hairs on my neck rising. I thought for sure Mary would wake up, but she slept on.

"It was instantaneous, Daddy, and even then, it was the greatest pain imaginable. Let me show you how it hurt."

The candle blew out and I dropped it. I didn't need it anyway. The mirror grew bright and Rae's smile went from ear to ear—literally—and the flesh on her bones seemed like crepe paper before a powerful fan, and that fan blew the hair off her head, the skin off her skull and melted those beautiful, blue eyes and those shiny white teeth of hers to a putrescent goo the color and consistency of fresh bird shit. Then there was only the skull, and it heaved in half and flew backward into the dark world of the mirror and there was no reflection now, only the hurtling

fragments of a life that once was and was now nothing more than swirling cosmic dust.

I closed my eyes and looked away.

"Daddy?"

I opened them, looked over my shoulder into the mirror. There was Rae again, smiling out of my back.

"Darling," I said, "I'm so sorry."

"So are we," she said, and there were faces floating past her in the mirror. Teenagers, children, men and women, babies, little embryos swirling around her head like planets around the sun. I closed my eyes again, but I could not keep them closed. When I opened them the multitudes of swirling dead, and those who had never had a chance to live, were gone. Only Rae was there.

"Come close to the mirror, Daddy."

I backed up to it. I backed until the hot wounds that were Rae's eyes touched the cold glass and the wounds became hotter and hotter and Rae called out, "Ride me piggy, Daddy," and then I felt her weight on my back, not the weight of a six-year-old child or a teenage girl, but a great weight, like the world was on my shoulders and bearing down.

Leaping away from the mirror I went hopping and whooping about the room, same as I used to go in the park. Around and around I went, and as I did, I glanced in the mirror. Astride me was Rae, lithe and naked, her red hair fanning around her as I spun. And when I whirled by the mirror again, I saw that she was six years old. Another spin and there was a skeleton with red hair, one hand held high, the jaws open and yelling, "Ride 'em, cowboy."

"How?" I managed, still bucking and leaping, giving Rae the ride of her life. She bent to my ear and I could feel her warm breath. "You want to know how I'm here, Daddy-dear? I'm here because you created me. Once you laid between Mother's legs and thrust me into existence, the two of you, with all the love there was in you. This time you thrust me into existence with your guilt and Mother's hate. Her thrusting needles, your arching back. And now I've come back for one last ride, Daddy-o. Ride, you bastard, ride."

All the while I had been spinning, and now as I glimpsed the mirror, I saw wall to wall faces, weaving in, weaving out, like smiling stars, and all those smiles opened wide and words came out in chorus, "Where were you when they dropped The Big One?"

Each time I spun and saw the mirror again, it was a new scene. Great flaming winds scorching across the world, babies turning to fleshy jello, heaps of charred bones, brains boiling out of the heads of men and

women like backed up toilets overflowing, The Almighty, Glory Hallelujah, Ours Is Bigger Than Yours Bomb hurtling forward, the mirror going mushroom white, then clear, and me, spinning, Rae pressed tight against my back, melting like butter on a griddle, evaporating into the eye wounds on my back, and finally me alone, collapsing to the floor beneath the weight of the world.

Mary never awoke.

The vines outsmarted me.

A single strand found a crack downstairs somewhere and wound up the steps and slipped beneath the door that led into the tower. Mary's bunk was not far from the door, and in the night, while I slept and later while I spun in front of the mirror and lay on the floor before it, it made its way to Mary's bunk, up between her legs, and entered her sex effortlessly.

I suppose I should give the vine credit for doing what I had not been able to do in years, Mr. Journal, and that's enter Mary. Oh God, that's a funny one, Mr. Journal. Real funny. Another little scientist joke. Let's make that a mad scientist joke, what say? Who but a madman would play with the lives of human beings by constantly trying to build the bigger and better boom machine?

So what of Rae, you ask?

I'll tell you. She is inside me. My back feels the weight. She twists in my guts like a corkscrew. I went to the mirror a moment ago, and the tattoo no longer looks like it did. The eyes have turned to crusty sores and the entire face looks like a scab. It's as if the bile that made up my soul, unthinking, nearsightedness, the guilt that I am, has festered from inside and spoiled the picture with pustule bumps, knots and scabs.

To put it in layman's terms, Mr. Journal, my back is infected. Infected with what I am. A blind, senseless fool.

The wife?

Ah, the wife. God, how I loved that woman. I have not really touched her in years, merely felt those wonderful hands on my back as she jabbed the needles home, but I never stopped loving her. It was not a love that glowed anymore, but it was there, though hers for me was long gone and wasted.

This morning when I got up from the floor, the weight of Rae and the world on my back, I saw the vine coming up from beneath the door and stretching over to her. I yelled her name. She did not move. I ran to her and saw it was too late. Before I could put a hand on her, I saw her flesh

ripple and bump up, like a den of mice were nesting under a quilt. The vines were at work. (Out goes the old guts, in goes the new vines.)

There was nothing I could do for her.

I made a torch out of a chair leg and an old quilt, set fire it it, burned the vine from between her legs, watched it retreat, smoking, under the door. Then I got a board, nailed it along the bottom, hoping it would keep others out for at least a little while. I got one of the twelve-gauges and loaded it. It's on the desk beside me, Mr. Journal, but even I know I'll never use it. It was just something to do, as Jacobs said when he killed and ate the whale. Something to do.

I can hardly write anymore. My back and shoulders hurt so bad. It's the weight of Rae and the world.

I've just come back from the mirror and there is very little left of the tattoo. Some blue and black ink, a touch of red that was Rae's hair. It looks like an abstract painting now. Collapsed design, running colors. It's real swollen. I look like the hunchback of Notre Dame.

What am I going to do, Mr. Journal?

Well, as always, I'm glad you asked that. You see, I've thought this out. I could throw Mary's body over the railing before it blooms. I could do that. Then I could doctor my back. It might even heal, though I doubt it. Rae wouldn't let that happen, I can tell you now. And I don't blame her. I'm on her side. I'm just a walking dead man and have been for years.

I could put the shotgun under my chin and work the trigger with my toe, or maybe push it with the very pen I'm using to create you, Mr. Journal. Wouldn't that be neat? Blow my brains to the ceiling and sprinkle you with my blood.

But as I said, I loaded the gun because it was something to do. I'd never use it on myself or Mary.

You see, I want Mary. I want her to hold Rae and me one last time like she used to in the park. And she can. There's a way.

I've drawn all the curtains and made curtains out of blankets for those spots where there aren't any. It'll be sunup soon and I don't want that kind of light in here. I'm writing this by candlelight and it gives the entire room a warm glow. I wish I had wine. I want the atmosphere to be just right.

Over on Mary's bunk she's starting to twitch. Her neck is swollen where the vines have congested and are writhing toward their favorite morsel, the brain. Pretty soon the rose will bloom (I hope she's one of the bright yellow ones, yellow was her favorite color and she wore it well) and Mary will come for me.

#### 512 Joe R. Lansdale

When she does, I'll stand with my naked back to her. The vines will whip out and cut me before she reaches me, but I can stand it. I'm used to pain. I'll pretend the thorns are Mary's needles. I'll stand that way until she folds her dead arms around me and her body pushes up against the wound she made in my back, the wound that is our daughter Rae. She'll hold me so the vines and the proboscis can do their work. And while she holds me, I'll grab her fine hands and push them against my chest, and it will be we three again, standing against the world, and I'll close my eyes and delight in her soft, soft hands one last time.

# **Apples**

### Ramsey Campbell

Born in Liverpool on January 4, 1946, Ramsey Campbell may have been bitten by the same bat that nipped Robert Bloch thirty years earlier, inasmuch as Campbell also fell under the spell of H.P. Lovecraft as a teenager. He was 18 when his first book was published by Arkham House—a collection of Lovecraftian stories entitled The Inhabitant of the Lake & Less Welcome Tenants. Like Bloch, Campbell soon went on to establish his own particular brand of contemporary horror—often utilizing Liverpool settings—and, again like Bloch, often presented from the viewpoint of an unbalanced observer. Campbell's fiction seems to blend urban paranoia, childhood terrors, and repressed sexual conflicts into an unnerving mixture that is not what the general public wants to confront in a read-it-on-the-train, mass market horror novel.

Despite this handicap, Campbell's books have done rather well in recent years. His latest novels include Obsession, Hungry Moon, Incarnate, and The Influence, as well as the collections, Cold Print and Scared Stiff. He is currently working on another novel, tentatively titled The Dead Hunt. Campbell's original titles are often changed upon publication; thus Blind Dark became Hungry Moon, For the Rest of Their Lives became Obsession, The Revelations of Glaaki became Cold Print, while the American edition of To Wake the Dead was retitled The Parasite. A British collection, supposedly entitled The Best of Ramsey Campbell, is set for 1987. Considering that Ramsey Campbell has had at least one story in all but one volume of The Year's Best Horror Stories, one need look no further for stories to fill such a book.

WE WANTED to be scared on Halloween, but not like that. We never meant anything to happen to Andrew. We only wanted him not to be so useless and show us he could do something he was scared of doing. I know I was scared the night I went to the allotments when Mr. Gray was still alive.

We used to watch him from Colin's window in the tenements, me and Andrew and Colin and Colin's little sister, Jill. Sometimes he worked in his allotment until midnight, my mum once said. The big lamps on the paths through the estate made his face look like a big white candle with a long nose that was melting. Jill kept shouting "Mr. Toad" and shutting the window quick, but he never looked up. Only he must have known it was us and that's why he said we took his apples when kids from the other end of the estate did really.

He took our mums and dads to see how they'd broken his hedge because he'd locked his gate. "If Harry says he didn't do it, then he didn't," my dad said and Colin's, who was a wrestler, said, "If I find out who's been up to no good they'll be walking funny for a while." But Andrew's mum only said, "I just hope you weren't mixed up in this, Andrew." His dad and mum were like that, they were teachers and tried to make him friends at our school they taught at, boys who didn't like getting dirty and always had combs and handkerchiefs. So then whenever we were cycling round the paths by the allotments and Mr. Gray saw us he said things like, "There are the children who can't keep their hands off other people's property," to anyone who was passing. So one night Colin pinched four apples off his tree, and then it was my turn.

I had to wait for a night my mum sent me to the shop. The woman isn't supposed to sell kids cigarettes, but she does because she knows my mum. I came back past the allotments and when I got to Mr. Gray's I ducked down behind the hedge.

The lamps that were supposed to stop people being mugged turned everything gray in the allotments and made Mr. Gray's windows look as if they had metal shutters on. I could hear my heart jumping. I went to where the hedge was low and climbed over.

He'd put broken glass under the hedge. I managed to land on tiptoe in between the bits of glass. I hated him then, and I didn't even bother taking apples from where he mightn't notice, I just pulled some off and threw them over the hedge for the worms to eat. We wouldn't have eaten them, all his apples tasted old and bitter. I gave my mum her cigarettes and went up to Colin's and told Andrew, "Your turn next."

He started hugging himself. "I can't. My parents might know."

"They said we were stealing, as good as said it," Jill said. "They probably thought you were. My dad said he'd pull their heads off and stick them you-know-where if he thought that's what they meant about us."

"You've got to go," Colin said. "Harry went and he's not even eleven. Go now if you like before my mum and dad come back from the pub."

Andrew might have thought Colin meant to make him, because he started shaking and saying, "No I won't," and then there was a stain on

the front of his trousers. "Look at the baby weeing himself," Colin and Jill said.

I felt sorry for him. "Maybe he doesn't feel well. He can go another night."

"I'll go if he won't," Jill said.

"You wouldn't let a girl go, would you?" Colin said to Andrew, but then their mum and dad came back. Andrew ran upstairs and Colin said to Jill, "You really would have gone too, wouldn't you?"

"I'm still going." She was so cross she went red. "I'm just as brave as you two, braver." And we couldn't stop her the next night, when her mum

was watching Jill's dad at work being the Hooded Gouger.

I thought she'd be safe. There'd been a storm in the night and the wind could have blown down the apples. But I was scared when I saw how small she looked down there on the path under the lamps, and I'd never noticed how long it took to walk to the allotments, all that way she might have to run back. Her shadow kept disappearing as if something was squashing it and then it jumped in front of her. We couldn't see in Mr. Gray's windows for the lamps.

When she squatted down behind Mr. Gray's hedge, Andrew said, "Looks like she's been taken short," to try to sound like us, but Colin just glared at him. She threw her coat on the broken glass, then she got over the hedge and ran to the tree. The branches were too high for her. "Leave it," Colin said, but she couldn't have heard him, because she started climbing. She was halfway up when Mr. Gray came out of his house.

He'd got a pair of garden shears. He grinned when he saw Jill, because even all that far away we could see his teeth. He ran round to where the hedge was low. He couldn't really run, it was like a fat old white dog trying, but there wasn't anywhere else for Jill to climb the hedge. Colin ran out, and I was going to open the window and shout at Mr. Gray when he climbed over the hedge to get Jill.

He was clicking the shears. I could see the blades flash. Andrew wet himself and ran upstairs, and I couldn't open the window or even move. Jill jumped off the tree and hurt her ankles, and when she tried to get away from him she was nearly as slow as he was. But she ran to the gate and tried to climb it, only it fell over. Mr. Gray ran after her waving the shears when she tried to crawl away, and then he grabbed his chest like they do in films when they're shot, and fell into the hedge.

Colin ran to Jill and brought her back, and all that time Mr. Gray didn't move. Jill was shaking but she never cried, only shouted through the window at Mr. Gray. "That'll teach you," she shouted, even when Colin

said, "I think he's dead." We were glad until we remembered Jill's coat was down there on the glass.

I went down though my chest was hurting. Mr. Gray was leaning over the hedge with his hands hanging down as if he was trying to reach the shears that had fallen standing up in the earth. His eyes were open with the lamps in them and looking straight at Jill's coat. He looked as if he'd gone bad somehow, as if he'd go all out of shape if you poked him. I grabbed Jill's coat, and just then the hedge creaked and he leaned forward as if he was trying to reach me. I ran away and didn't look back, because I was sure that even though he was leaning farther his head was up so he could keep watching me.

I didn't sleep much that night and I don't think the others did. I kept getting up to see if he'd moved, because I kept thinking he was creeping up on the tenements. He was always still in the hedge, until I fell asleep, and when I looked again he wasn't there. The ambulance must have taken him away, but I couldn't get to sleep for thinking I could hear him on the stairs.

Next night my mum and dad were talking about how some woman found him dead in the hedge and the police went into his house. My mum said the police found a whole bedroom full of rotten fruit, and some books in his room about kids. Maybe he didn't like kids because he was afraid what he might to do them, she said, but that was all she'd say.

Colin and me dared each other to look in his windows and Jill went too. All we could see was rooms with nothing in them now except sunlight making them look dusty. I could smell rotten fruit and I kept thinking Mr. Gray was going to open one of the doors and show us his face gone bad. We went to see how many apples were left on his tree, only we didn't go in the allotment because when I looked at the house I saw a patch on one of the windows as if someone had wiped it clean to watch us. Jill said it hadn't been there before we'd gone to the hedge. We stayed away after that, and every night when I looked out of my room the patch was like a white face watching from his window.

Then someone else moved into his house and by the time the clocks went back and it got dark an hour earlier, we'd forgotten about Mr. Gray, at least Colin and Jill and me had. It was nearly Halloween and then a week to Guy Fawkes Night. Colin was going to get some zombie videos to watch on Halloween because his mum and dad would be at the wrestling, but then Andrew's mum found out. Andrew came and told us he was having a Halloween party instead. "If you don't come there won't be anyone," he said.

"All right, we'll come," Colin said, but Jill said, "Andrew's just too

scared to watch the zombies. I expect they make him think of Mr. Toad. He's scared of Mr. Toad even now he's dead."

Andrew got red and stamped his foot. "You wait," he said.

The day before Halloween, I saw him hanging round near Mr. Gray's allotment when it was getting dark. He turned away when I saw him, pretending he wasn't there. Later I heard him go upstairs slowly as if he was carrying something, and I nearly ran out to catch him and make him go red.

I watched telly until my mum told me to go to bed three times. Andrew always went to bed as soon as his mum came home from night school. I went to draw my curtains and I saw someone in Mr. Gray's allotment, bending down under the apple tree as if he was looking for something. He was bending down so far I thought he was digging his face in the earth. When he got up his face looked too white under the lamps, except for his mouth that was messy and black. I pulled the curtains and jumped into bed in case he saw me, but I think he was looking at Andrew's window.

Next day at school Andrew bought Colin and Jill and me sweets. He must have been making sure we went to his party. "Where'd you get all that money?" Jill wanted to know.

"Mummy gave it to me to buy apples," Andrew said and started looking round as if he was scared someone could hear him.

He wouldn't walk home past Mr. Gray's. He didn't know I wasn't going very near after what I'd seen in the allotment. He went the long way round behind the tenements. I got worried when I didn't hear him come in and I went down in case some big kids had done him. He was hiding under the bonfire we'd all built behind the tenements for Guy Fawkes Night. He wouldn't tell me who he was hiding from. He nearly screamed when I looked in at him in the tunnel he'd made under there.

"Don't go if you don't want to," my mum said because I took so long over my tea. "I better had," I said, but I waited until Andrew came to find out if we were ever going, then we all went up together. It wasn't his party we minded so much as his mum and dad telling us what to do.

The first thing his dad said when we went in was "Wipe your feet," though we hadn't come from outside. It was only him there, because Andrew's mum was going to come back soon so he could go to a meeting. Then he started talking in the kind of voice teachers put on just before the holidays to make you forget they're teachers. "I expect your friends would like a Halloween treat," he said and got some baked potatoes out of the oven, but only Andrew had much. I'd just eaten and, besides, the

smell of apples kept getting into the taste of the potatoes and making me feel funny.

There were apples hanging from a rope across the room and floating in a washing-up bowl full of water on some towels on the floor. "If that's the best your friends can do with my Halloween cuisine I think it's about time for games," Andrew's dad said and took our plates away, grousing like a school dinner lady. When he came back, Andrew said, "Please may you tie my hands."

"I don't know about that, son." But Andrew gave him a handkerchief to tie them with and looked as if he was going to cry, so his dad said, "Hold them out, then."

"No, behind my back."

"I don't think your mother would permit that." Then he must have seen how Andrew wanted to be brave in front of us, so he made a face and tied them. "I hope your friends have handkerchiefs too," he said.

He tied our hands behind our backs, wrinkling his nose at Jill's handkerchief, and we let him for Andrew's sake. "Now the point of the game is to bring down an apple by biting it," he said, as if we couldn't see why the apples were hanging up. Only I wished he wouldn't go on about it because talking about them seemed to make the smell stronger.

Jill couldn't quite reach. When he held her up she kept bumping the apple with her nose and said a bad word when the apple came back and hit her. He put her down then quick and Colin had a go. His mouth was almost as big as one of the apples, and he took a bite first time, then he spat it out on the floor. "What on earth do you think you're doing? Would you do that at home?" Andrew's dad shouted, back to being a teacher again, and went to get a dustpan and a mop.

"Where did you get them apples?" Colin said to Andrew. Andrew looked at him to beg him not to ask in front of his dad, and we all knew. I remembered not noticing there weren't any apples on Mr. Gray's tree any more. We could see Andrew was trying to show us he wasn't scared, only he had to wait until his mum or dad was there. When his dad finished clearing up after Colin, Andrew said, "Let's have duck-apples now."

He knelt down by the bowl of water and leaned his head in. He kept his face in the water so long I thought he was looking at something and his dad went to him in case he couldn't get up. He pulled his face out spluttering and I went next, though I didn't like how nervous he looked now.

I wished I hadn't. The water smelled stale and tasted worse. Whenever I tried to pick up an apple with just my mouth without biting into it, it

sank and then bobbed up, and I couldn't see it properly. I didn't like not being able to see the bottom of the bowl. I had another go at an apple so I could get away, but Andrew's dad or someone must have stood over me, because the water got darker and I thought the apple bobbing up was bigger than my head and looking at me. I felt as if someone was holding my head down in the water and I couldn't breathe. I tried to knock the bowl over and spilled a bit of water on the towels. Andrew's dad hauled me out of the bowl as if I was a dog. "I think we'll dispense with the duck-apples," he said, and then the doorbell rang.

"That must be your mother without her keys again," he told Andrew, sounding relieved. "Just don't touch anything until one of us is here." He went down and we heard the door slam and then someone coming up. It wasn't him, the footsteps were too slow and loud. I kept tasting the appley water and feeling I was going to be sick. The footsteps took so long I thought I wouldn't be able to look when they came in. The door opened and Jill screamed, because there was someone wearing a dirty sheet and a skull for a face. "It's only Mummy," Andrew said, laughing at Jill for being scared. "She said she might dress up."

Just then the doorbell rang again and made us all jump. Andrew's mum closed the door of the flat as if the bell wasn't even ringing. "It must be children," Andrew said, looking proud of himself because he was talking for his mother. Jill was mad at him for laughing at her. "I want to duck for apples," she said, even though the smell was stronger and rottener. "I didn't have a go."

Andrew's mum nodded and went round making sure our hands were tied properly, then she pushed Jill to the bowl without taking her hands from under the sheet. Jill looked at her to tell her she didn't care if she wanted to pretend that much, Jill wasn't scared. The bell rang again for a long time but we all ignored it. Jill bent over the bowl and Andrew's mum leaned over her. The way she was leaning I thought she was going to hold Jill down, except Jill dodged out of the way. "There's something in there," she said.

"There's only apples," Andrew said. "I didn't think you'd be scared." Jill looked as if she'd have hit him if she'd been able to get her hands from behind her back. "I want to try the apples hanging up again," she said. "I didn't have a proper go."

She went under the rope and tried to jump high enough to get an apple, and then something tapped on the window. She nearly fell down, and even Colin looked scared. I know I was, because I thought someone had climbed up to the third floor to knock on the window. I thought Mr.

Gray had. But Andrew grinned at us because his mum was there and said, "It's just those children again throwing stones."

His mum picked Jill up and Jill got the apple first time. She bit into it just as more stones hit the window, and then we heard Andrew's dad shouting outside. "It's me, Andrew. Let me in. Some damn fool locked me out when I went down."

Jill made a noise as if she was trying to scream. She'd spat out the apple and goggled at it on the floor. Something was squirming in it. I couldn't move and Colin couldn't either, because Andrew's mum's hands had come out from under the sheet to hold Jill. Only they were white and dirty, and they didn't look like any woman's hands. They didn't look much like hands at all.

Then both the arms came worming out from under the sheet to hold Jill so she couldn't move any more than Colin and me could, and the head started shaking to get the mask off. I'd have done anything rather than see underneath, the arms looked melted enough. All we could hear was the rubber mask creaking and something flopping round inside it, and the drip on the carpet from Andrew wetting himself. But suddenly Andrew squeaked, the best he could do for talking. "You leave her alone. She didn't take your apples, I did. You come and get me."

The mask slipped as if him under the sheet was putting his head on one side, then the arms dropped Jill and reached out for Andrew. Andrew ran to the door and we saw he'd got his hands free. He ran onto the stairs saying, "Come on, you fat old toad, try and catch me."

Him under the sheet went after him and we heard them running down, Andrew's footsteps and the others that sounded bare and squelchy. Me and Colin ran to Jill when we could move to see if she was all right apart from being sick on the carpet. When I saw she was, I ran down fast so that I wouldn't think about it, to find Andrew.

I heard his dad shouting at him behind the tenements. "Did you do this? What's got into you?" Andrew had got matches from somewhere and set light to the bonfire. His dad didn't see anything else, but I did, a sheet and something jumping about inside it, under all that fire. Andrew must have crawled through the tunnel he'd made but him in the sheet had got stuck. I watched the sheet flopping about when the flames got to it, then it stopped moving when the tunnel caved in on it. "Come upstairs, I want a few words with you," Andrew's dad said, pulling him by his ear. But when we got in the building he let go and just gaped, because Andrew's hair had gone dead white.

## Dead White Women

#### William F. Wu

William F. Wu's first published short story, "By the Flicker of the One-Eyed Flame," sold in 1975, was adapted and performed on stage by East/West Players of Los Angeles in 1977. His more recent fantasy story, "Wong's Lost and Found Emporium," was adapted into an episode of the new Twilight Zone television series in 1985. At latest count Wu has sold over twenty pieces of short fiction, appearing in such magazines as Omni, Analog, Amazing, Twilight Zone Magazine, and Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, in addition to various anthologies. His first novel, MasterPlay, was published this year by Questar, and his second novel, The Cyborg, is set for later this year.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1951, Wu holds a Ph.D. in American Culture from the University of Michigan. After a stay in the Los Angeles area, he has recently moved to Kansas. "Dead White Women" was first published in the Kansas small press magazine, Eldritch Tales. Just when

you thought it was safe. . . .

THE MAGIC OF the soul was affection and hate, theirs and mine. They liked me and I didn't hate them. So their deaths were ordained somewhere in the blue-eyed world of silly old tunes and sentimental nonsense.

Death Angel, can you hear me?

Cyn was eighteen, like me, all mush on the inside and soft 'n' squishy on the outside. She was less than five feet tall and from a distance she looked like a basketball with two bowling balls stuck on the front. She had short brown hair. I had known her for years and thought our going out together would be pleasant, but no big deal. On a muggy midwestern summer night, I pulled my daddy's car up to the front of her family's house.

Their front yard was mostly bluegrass, with a patch of thick brown zoisia in one corner away from the driveway. The earth smelled damp and fresh; it was no night to go barefoot unless you wanted to feel smashed slugs oozing up between your toes. Cyn was the same consistency, but she held together pretty well.

I stood on the porch under a bright white light. After I knocked, I listened to the footsteps inside and waited while a shadow darkened the little peep-hole in the door. I survived the scrutiny, being a rather scrawny plain-looking slant-eyed kid from the high school who was expected anyway, and Cyn's mother opened the door.

Cyn's mother had the same height and build as her daughter, plus a surprisingly cute face that resembled the front of the Roman war galley in "Ben Hur."

"Hello, Hello, come in. How are you? Cyn will be ready in just a minute. This way, sit down."

"Hi. Okay." I followed her into the living room, walking with my hands in my pockets. The place was small and warm and cozy, with a plush carpet and well-polished wooden lamp tables. The easy chair and the couch were all soft and padded, like Cyn and her mother. I sat down on the couch, grinning fatuously, and looked up at her.

She looked back, grinning just as idiotically, with her hands folded in front of her. "I think it's just so nice you two are going out. Oh, here's Cyn's daddy. Daddy, this is John."

I stood up, as a solid stocky man with a crew cut and a scowl came in from the dining room. He stuck a smokeless pipe between his teeth, faked a smile, and stuck out his hand.

"How do you do, John." He made a faint attempt at sounding hearty. "Hi," I muttered, trying not to wince as he crushed the bones in my hand and then twisted the wreckage back and forth a few times experimentally. "Uh, fine—thanks."

He promptly lost interest and turned to switch on a big console color tv. With his eyes fixed on the shifting images on the screen, he backed up slowly until he hit the couch and then allowed himself to fall backward onto it. I stuck the remains of my hand back into my pocket.

His wife smiled and shrugged. "Don't mind him. He used to kill Japs in the Pacific."

"Oh," I said. "Of course."

Cyn came rolling down the hall, smiling nicely. "I know, I know, I'm always late. Shall we go?"

"Guess we better," I said. "Bye."

"Midnight," said Cyn's mother, poking her daughter's shoulder with an index finger. The finger sank in up to the first knuckle, like when you check the water for cooking rice.

"I know, I know." Cyn took my arm and we walked across the lawn.

"We're still in time for the movie," I said.

"Ugh, look at the slugs," said Cyn. "Oh, yuck."

We went to see "Walk Like a Dragon," starring Jack Lord. James Shigeta and Mobu McCarthy played Chinese immigrants in the Old West, like my ancestors had been. Shigeta wins the girl but loses the gunfight. Anyway, it was the first time I'd seen a Chinese guy wear a queue and a gun and speak regular English in a movie.

"Hope your father doesn't see this," I said at the end. "He might get

trigger-happy."

"That's dumb. Besides, these people in the movies are Chinese."

"No, they aren't. The actors, I mean. They're Japanese Americans. Besides, it wouldn't matter to him."

"Oh. Well, you're right; it wouldn't."

I took her to Allen's Drive-In, where we sat in the car. She ordered a chocolate shake. I had a double cheeseburger, fries, a root beer, and later asked for a piece of cheesecake.

"Why aren't you fat?" Cyn asked me.

"Mmm." I had a mouthful of food.

"Nobody ever asks me out," said Cyn.

When I could talk, I said, "I never ask anybody out."

"Isn't it nice? We belong together."

Warning bells went off in my head, but before I could puke, she threw her arms around me. I went down hard and stayed pinned until the waitress arrived with the cheesecake. Then I sat up, paid, and floored the accelerator. My daddy's car wouldn't lay rubber; instead, it backfired twice and stalled out. Even so, Cyn retreated and I headed for her house.

What did I know? I had thought we would be two old friends going out for a pleasant evening. We had been casual friends for several years in school; how would I know that showing up after dinner meant I was a gentleman caller? I thought I was John Chinaman, local nerd. In fact, I was. Only now I was a nerd with a girlfriend.

We went out three more times. She spent most of the time talking about how far she would let me go, constantly trying to get me to go for the minimum. I was too disappointed, finding that an old friend had suddenly started leaving her brains at home whenever we got together. Besides, two thoughts kept occurring to me: her father killed Japs and when white women liked slanted eyes, white women die.

On our fourth date, I succumbed like the nerd I was. I had picked up this cheapie little ring and was going to give it to her. Since I didn't know how to get rid of her, I figured I might as well do what she wanted.

We were sitting in the front seat of the car in the parking lot of my

grade school. Tall trees hid one corner of it from the street, making it one of the very few spots where cops did not check parked cars with their flashlights. I waited as late as I could.

"Well," I said, "would you, uh, be interested in a little, real cheapie

ring?"

"Sure!" She brightened so much, I felt guilty.

"Here," I said.

"Ooh." She took it and stuck it onto her little finger. It went past the first knuckle, but not the second. She had to take it off again. "I love it. Thank you, you're wonderful."

I got a hug and a kiss while I started the car. At the stroke of twelve, my daddy's car failed one more time, turning into a pumpkin. Or else it was killed by the jolts it took trying to cross a set of railroad tracks.

"Get out. Better get a two truck, quick," I said. "Hurry."

We both jumped out and started on foot. The vibration in the ground was subtle at first, and we kept walking. Then the earth began to shake, and the rumble of a train was unmistakable. I hustled her farther down the road; the car was doomed. We turned to watch.

"Oh, no," she cried. "I left the ring in the car!" She started to run back. "Wait. Wait!"

She went running back, bobbing and waddling faster than I had ever thought she could. I was running flat out behind her, and gaining, but she was already at the car. Ahead of me, she yanked open the passenger door and threw herself inside. A deadly white light illuminated the whole scene and a great booming sepulchral note from the train sailed across the sky in harmonious company with the rhythmic rumbling of the tracks. The huge diesel smashed into the car and sent chunks flying in all directions.

I felt sick. That night, the next day, at the funeral, for months after, I felt very sick. I had not known her very well—eighteen-year-olds rarely know each other *very* well—and I hadn't liked her much lately. But I was sick.

I want my baby back.

Then for a while I walked around feeling tough. I had survived the accidental death of a girlfriend, and that seemed tragically romantic. Next I decided that I had grown up from this experience, but I hadn't, especially. Just a little, to an ordinary extent for such an event. Then I got well.

525

Blue Eyes was coming to me, from out of the skies on flight somethingor-other—but that was just a nickname

Ann's eyes were a striking blue that set off her huge frizzy triangle of red-orange hair. The freckles were a bonus.

Ann was no accident. I went after her deliberately in college, being only half a nerd now. She thought I acted silly but cute, like a puppy.

I was sitting in one of the lounges in the dormitory. The place was jammed with all the dateless and homeless flotsam of a Saturday night, scruffy and loud and not very drunk. Laughing, hairy, barefoot students tumbled and sprawled across the furniture and all over the floor. Two games of Scrabble were in progress on the red carpet and the stereo speakers imbedded in the wall thumped and whined in acidic rhythms.

The dizzy redhead cartwheeled across the top of the couch, celebrating the blaring music. Ann finished with a headstand that exhibited a luscious silhouette, and then she let herself gently fall into my lap. We knew each other some.

"Hi," she shouted in my ear, laughing. "How are ya?"

"Oh-fine," I yelled back, making the response a one-word sound. I started getting us untangled and saw that one of the Scrabble games was breaking up. "Wanna play Scrabble?"

"Oh, boy." With childlike enthusiasm, she leaped to the floor and scrambled to one of the boards. Some of the other players were leaving; some were staying for another round.

I followed Ann to the floor, squinting through marijuana smoke at the board. She handed me a little wooden rack and we all started picking letters.

The game started quickly. The first turns we all had seemed dull to me, but Ann kept studying all the new developments with a half-genuine, half-self-parodying excitement.

"Fops," she read off the board.

I looked at my letters. "Oxymoron. That's a word." I placed it on the board by including an o already down along one side, thereby catching two triple-word-score squares. It was worth around fifty points, plus a fifty-point bonus for using all my letters.

"You're pretty smart for a half-nerd." Ann yelled in my ear and grabbed me by the throat with one hand. Then she stood up and I followed, to minimize the likelihood of a crushed windpipe. She patted me on the head with her other hand and took me upstairs to her room for a nasty retribution.

I learned in time that Ann's bright reddish mane of frizz darkened slightly and went tame when it got wet. A year later it was plastered against her head from the spray in my apartment shower. Her hair ran in waves down the sides of her head as she stood with her soapy face tilted up at me, blinking against the water coming at her eyes from over my shoulder.

"I'm finished," she said loudly, over the sound of the water. Her voice

reverberated among the tiles. "Lemme get in the water."

I moved around and let her stand under the spray. Her freckles were sun-darkened, but she was literally white in the places never open to the sun. I had a pronounced swimsuit line myself, but the effect was less noticeable. She was incredibly sensuous, but also looked kind of funny. I started soaping myself to quit thinking about it.

"You got soap in your eyes, dummy." She grabbed the shower nozzle and hosed off my face with it. Then she moved it down to get the rest of

me.

"Yow! Watch it."

"Oop—sorry. Is that better?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, you've still got soap caught next to your eyes." She reached up to brush her finger at the outside corner of one eye. "It's caught in this little foldy-slanty place."

"Yeah, that happens."

"I got it."

She cleared the other one, too, and finished rinsing us both.

"You're not bad for a half-nerd," she yelled in my ear. Then she turned off the water and grabbed me, not by the throat, with one hand. Then she got out and I followed, dripping and quivering, hitching forward to minimize the likelihood of ripped flesh. She tossed a towel over my head with her other hand and took me into the other room for a careful re-examination.

Ann and I stayed together for most of several years. I was never in the military and we didn't discuss getting married, but: when white women like, et cetera, die.

I stood beneath the tower of a tiny airport, one neither cleared for jets nor sprayed for roaches. The searchlight circled the sky in silent unending swings, a beacon for flight 1203. Inside the low terminal building, a handful of small-town folks sat waiting in overalls, raincoats, plastic windbreakers, and dirty work clothes. I stared into the sky for Ann for an hour and a half, into a darkness more deadly than the vainest—

My thoughts were interrupted by an airline guy who came around to tell us all. Somewhere off in the distance, a storm had arisen quickly.

Blue Eyes and her red hair and her grabbing hand would not be coming in for a landing, anywhere.

Death Angel, can you see me?

This time was no better, but it was different. I was older and meaner and I had gone through this before. Instead of getting sick, I got angry. I had really wanted Ann, most of the time.

I want my baby back.

I stayed angry long enough to kick out the windows of my apartment, chase all the cats out of the alley, and lose all of my sensitive, fainthearted friends. The only ones left were the dense, unfeeling brutes. We had a good time there for a while.

Ann. Just another pretty redhead with brains and integrity.

Even after a few years had passed, and I was as much back to normal as I was going to get, I had lost my interest in romance.

I looked into the muddy water.

I looked into the muddy water.

I looked—

Actually, I'm still not sure whose face I saw. I didn't think I looked that lonely.

Alice did.

Alice just kind of showed up. I was prowling the winter night spots that week, with little money and less interest. I did it for something to do. Alice was a seven-year-old in an adult's body, an expatriate New Yorker by her accent, with burly brown hair. Two-thirds of her weight was below her waist. She tried to balance it by swelling her head.

"I have an I.Q. of 147," she told me at a bar.

I was sitting on a stool leaning over a Seven-Up and staring into the mirror behind the rows of bottles against the far wall. "Huh?" I said.

"You look smart. Are you an engineer? But I'm smarter." She smiled condescendingly and turned on her stool to survey the crowd behind us. "I like the bridge of your nose—it's so little."

I went back to staring at myself in the mirror. The glass was cheap and flawed; if I raised myself up and down slightly on the stool, the image stretched and flowed and compressed like the reflections in fun-house mirrors. I was having a good time.

"I'm only interested in monogamous, long-term relationships," she said. "I'm trying to meet a good man. I'm Alice."

"Huh?" I said, for the sake of consistency.

"I've played enough games. Basically, I'm ready to settle down now, so I try to get out and meet people."

"You come to bars to meet serious people?" I sneaked a glance at her. She smiled viciously. "I met you, didn't I?"

"Hardly," I said. I started admiring myself in the mirror some more.

After a while I heard voices next to me and sneaked another look. Some guy from the back had come up to speak to her. The longer I listened, the weirder she sounded. I had heard that pleading tone and seen the searching look on other occasions, but only when small children were lost and seeking their parents. I was glad her attention had been drawn off.

I paid for the Seven-Up and left the place. As I passed the bar, Alice was saying to the other guy, "He's just a friend. I've played enough games. Basically, I'm. . . . "

Outside, I trudged through the snow, staring at the packed footprints. I wandered aimlessly down the small-town street and eventually plunged my hands into my pockets. Puzzled, I brought one of them out again holding a strange glove.

It was a gray woman's glove, for the left hand, with a note in it: "Meet me at the old oak tree in two hours. This guy's just a friend. Love, Alice."

I threw away the note, and kept the glove. The next establishment I came to was a games parlor, where I sank all of my quarters into video machines. I sideswiped spaceships, gunned down hockey players, strafed racing cars, and torpedoed small children. As usual, I beat all but one of them; the World War I biplanes sank my sled. When my change was gone, I stood and watched other people destroy the silent, fluid images—never mind the background noises. The magical screen is silent.

After an hour and fifty minutes, I asked somebody where the old oak tree was. Without taking his eyes off the screen or his hands off the controls, the guy inclined his head quickly in a discernible direction. I thanked him and started walking. Snow was falling lightly outside.

This side of town was fairly old. It was the only area that had not been recently built up and furnished with saplings. However, a large public park out this way was the only place for a landmark called the old oak tree. I remembered that a large, fast river flowed through the center of it. Then, in the distance, down in a sort of hollow, I could see one huge old black tree with dead brown leaves standing out against the snow, with its back to the running river.

As long as I was walking along the edge of town, I remained among the light and sounds of all the places open to customers, among all the people out for a Saturday night fling. Once I started down the slope toward the river bank, I found myself alone in a desolate white expanse broken only by the bare black branches of trees and the one great oak

straight ahead. It was surrounded by footprints in the snow.

The river ran deep and murky here. A small whitecap churned over one wide root of the big oak that extended into the muddy water. The white snow reflected so much light from the town that I could see all the way across the river to the other bank. It only held more snow, though, and more young naked trees.

The old oak tree seemed to be a common meeting place, judging by the footprints. Then I noticed a small glove lying at the base of the tree. I picked it up. It was the mate of the one I had with me. A piece of paper

crackled inside and I pulled it part way out.

The note was written in ink that had been smeared, apparently by someone who had arrived earlier and contributed to the footsteps around me. The first part of it was illegible, but the end was clear: "I just couldn't tell you that guy was just a friend. He wasn't. Goodbye forever. Love, Alice."

I dropped the glove on the snow in disgust. It was a stupid joke and I didn't like being suckered. Then I wondered. I glanced once more at the little glove with the paper sticking out of it. Then I stepped carefully around the big wide trunk of the old oak, with the river wind whipping tears into my eyes.

Two shapes looked back from the swirling murky depths. One was a frowning lonely face with tears in his eyes and lank hair tossed in the wind. Underneath it lay a calm sleeping face with closed eyelids, bobbing stiffly from under the root of the old oak.

When white women like slanted....

I glanced up quickly, as though trying to catch a grinning Death Angel by surprise. Are you somewhere up there?

I swallowed and stepped back. Alice had been sick long before I had met her, but she hadn't drowned herself until now. I wondered if I had been some sort of last straw, but of course I would never really know. Anyhow, logic meant nothing to someone like her.

*I want my.* . . . No, I don't.

I looked around. No one was watching. I hurried back up the slope, out of the park.

Where oh where can my—never mind. I knew where; they were all dead and planted. Sometimes, though, I still wondered where I might find romance.

I found romance ten years after Cyn got herself smeared across the

railroad tracks. I ran into Gail early one summer when we were both back in town visiting our parents—I had known her in high school, and had been interested, but she had been seeing someone else. She was very pretty, with deep-set hazel eyes and short light brown hair. Her build was stocky yet very appealing. She mentioned that she was married but getting divorced. I asked her out to dinner.

The evening grew weird from the moment I got into my daddy's car—his current one, that is. Since I had flown into town, I had had to borrow it for the night. As I drove quietly through the old familiar residential streets, breathing the humid air and smelling the lush lawns that I knew so well, I realized that I was back in a situation like dating in high school. I grinned to myself. It had been a long time.

I pulled up in front of Gail's parents' house. The sun, behind a layer of clouds, was just starting down below the treetops. A summer storm was gathering over the prairie country here. I got out and walked across the bluegrass on the lawn.

I stood on the porch smelling the rain to come, and knocked on the screen door. It rattled. Gail's mother came to the door, also stocky and rather appealing. She was carrying a copy of *The Big Knockover* by Dashiell Hammett, with one finger in the book to mark her place.

Gail's mother smiled nicely. "Come in." She pushed the screen door open.

"Thanks." I followed her into a small living room, where she put the book down open-faced on an end-table.

"Sit down, John. Gail will be down in a few minutes. She's late, of course. How have you been?"

We sat down on opposite ends of a couch. "Okay," I said. We had met a few times ten or eleven years ago. I looked around. Gail was making noises upstairs, but no one else seemed to be home.

"I'm not funny any more," I said.

"You what?"

"I used to be snide and clever. Sarcastic and sardonic. Dry wit and disgusting metaphors. Snappy comebacks."

"I, um, don't think I knew that."

"Well, I am no longer capable of this. My life has been a nearly-endless succession of tragedies. I'm jaded and bitter."

"Oh, I see." She smiled and stood up. "Excuse me, won't you?"

"Sure."

She walked out of sight to the foot of the stairs I had seen near the door and screamed fiercely in a hoarse stage whisper. "Gail you goddamn inconsiderate bitch! Get down here!" Then she came back, smiled pleas-

antly, and sat down again. "Well, really, John. What are you bitter about?"

"Dead women."

"What?"

"Dead white women. Every time I meet a new woman, she croaks on me."

"Oh. Well. . . ." She smiled again, but her voice was hesitant. "I certainly hope that, uh, won't happen to Gail. Of course, you've known her for years."

"Of course."

Still smiling, she looked her lap. Then she started using one of her thumbnails to clean the other one.

In the silence, I looked out the big picture window at the darkening sky. A random thought crossed my mind: Death Angel, sing me a song.

Gail hurried down the stairs, still fastening one earring. She looked

"Sorry I'm late." She giggled. "I've always been late; I can't help it. Shall we go?"

"Let's go," I said. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye," said Gail's mother. "Drive carefully, all right?"

"All right," I said.

We crossed the lawn toward the car. The wind was chilly and I could feel a very faint drizzle beginning. The cool of the evening was going to take all the moisture from the summer air.

We got into the car just in time. The rain wasn't too heavy, but it was rain and not drizzle. "It's going to be wet all night," said Gail. "Well, I don't mind. Are we still going to be on time for the reservation?"

"Yeah. I made it for plenty of time after I was going to pick you up." I started the car and turned on the wipers. "Remember, I've known you a long time."

She laughed. "Oh!" She punched the side of my arm.

"Whoa! That's my drivin' arm." I pulled on the headlights and got us underway.

"Oops, sorry."

I drove through the darkness, watching the rain slant through the white beams of the headlights. The inside of the car felt warm and oozy. I slowed down for a red light. "It's wonderful to see you again."

"Well, thank you. It feels sort of funny, you know, after being married for so long—or maybe I shouldn't talk about that."

I laughed as I accelerated from the intersection. "I don't mind. If something comes up in the conversation, go 'head and say it."

"Oh, okay. Anyhow, it's been a long time since I went out with a man who wasn't my husband."

I could tell she was smiling, so I glanced over and smiled back. "It's been a long time for me since I was out with anyone."

I rounded a sharp curve and then slammed on the brakes. There in the road, straight ahead, a car was stalled. My car began to skid on the wet pavement. I couldn't stop, so I yanked the wheel to the right.

White women and slanted eyes.

At the last second, I saw the big white side of a building in my headlights. Then the tires cried, the metal shrieked, and glass shattered. Gail screamed—

I woke up watching a downpour against the windshield. With something warm and sticky in my eyes, I was lying on a front seat that was sharply tilted to the left. I could feel the weight of Gail against me. People were standing all around, at some distance, and I could see police cars in the rearview mirror, parked to block traffic. I could not have been out long. A tow truck pulled up as I wiped blood out of my eyes. Police officers came running toward us.

I could see people shouting and tugging at the doors, but I could not hear them. Gail's eyelids were moving slightly, so I maneuvered around to where I could raise her head. Beyond the windshield, an ambulance came floating into view, the image rippling through the rain on the windshield. Paramedics jumped out and ran toward us, leaving the big red light on the van swinging, throwing its beams at us in a deadly, silent rhythm.

Gail was trying to speak, but I couldn't understand her. I held her close instead, watching the swinging light from the ambulance cross us. Her injuries were not visible. The only blood on her face was mine, but the face was not hers.

In the shadows, her features were hard to see, but every time the red light of the ambulance swung our way, she changed, in a constant steady rhythm, still beating; Cyn's brown hair, Ann's red curls, Alice's frizz, Gail's deepest hazel eyes, Cyn and Ann and Alice and Gail, faces changing every time. Cyn now Ann now Alice now Gail. One and two and beating, beating.

Gail died in my arms. I could feel it. As crowbars began prying open her door, I tilted my head up toward the sky, trying to see through the rain on the windshield. My real lover had been with me all along.

Crowbars tore open the door. Cold rain and wind slashed inside, with sirens wailing their tragic song.

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Death Angel: Am I still your own true love?

And the harsh voice whispered sweetly in the tearing, chilling gale: See you in September.

I want—

I woke up in a hard bed, staring upward at a white ceiling. It had thousands of tiny cracks, like the magic in my soul. Something was wrapped around my head. The place smelled of isopropyl alcohol.

At first I didn't remember what had happened. When I did, I sat up suddenly and started to get out of bed. Inside my skull, bowling balls

smashed into pins. Tiny scorekeepers started marking Xs.

As I dangled my legs over a metal railing, trying to clear my brain, something stabbed the inside of one elbow. An IV was hooked into me. Carefully, to avoid the certainty of ripped flesh, I pulled off the tape and withdrew the needle. Then I slid off the bed. "For observation" was written on my chart, along with "concussion."

I was in a big ward, but stained white curtains separated me from the adjacent beds. I spent several minutes steadying myself. My knees were quivering, and my head seemed to waver around like a rotting apple about to drop. The flow was cold; I wore only a hospital gown. In front of me, a mirror reflected my image clearly, without waves or ripples. My head was bandaged, scarred, and pale, with lank hair lying flat.

Getting out was easy, after I retched twice in the room. My stomach had nothing to throw up, though. I found my clothes in a drawer and put the hospital gown back on over them. A little comb was in the packet of toilet articles supplied by the hospital. I walked out of the building like I owned the place, with my t-shirt casually draped over the spot where my i.d. tag should have been. Since no one looked closely, they all thought I was an Asian hospital worker of some kind, I supposed, wearing an ugly lab coat.

Or maybe no one noticed me.

A small gust of wind would have blown me over, but I clung to parking meters and old people as I moved down the sidewalk. On the outside, I learned that three days had passed—it was the first of September, late in the afternoon. Gail had just been plowed under.

I hitchhiked to my folks' place, made excuses, and went out again. In the garage, I heaved a shovel into the trunk of my mommy's car and took off. At the nearest fast food vendor, I ate a garbage burger and drank something resembling stagnant pond water. Then I threw up for real, ate another burger, and kept it.

At sundown, I pulled up to the top of the hill and stopped at the little

cemetery hidden among the suburban homes that had been built around it. It was far older than even the suburban city itself: some of the worn tombstones held vague indentations representing dates from the Civil War. I could hear television sets from inside some of the houses. A phone rang.

I took the shovel from the trunk. It was an old one, with a long handle worn smooth and gray over years of use. The heavy heart-shaped blade was all reddish-brown with rust. I climbed over the chainlink fence into the graveyard in the graying roseate light, hoisting the shovel overhead like a quarterstaff. The chirping of crickets was deafening.

I found the new grave easily, even in the gathered darkness. Yellowish light leaked from houses and streetlights, showing me fresh sod cut into distinct rectangles. The grass was wet from being watered all day. I wondered if Gail's mother had cried over it. Humidity made the air thick and heavy.

I wondered if slugs favored graveyards.

The sod peeled back easily. The dirt underneath had been tamped down, but was not packed very hard. I bit the shovel into it and stepped hard with one foot. It only went down a little; I was weak and underweight from living off the IV. So I moved the dirt slowly, in small loads on the tip of the shovel.

Hours later, I sat collapsed at the bottom of a relatively deep hole in the ground, soaked with sweat and half-eaten by mosquitoes. It was not deep enough.

The late summer stars above me were clear and bright. Dirt clung to the sweat on my face, arms, and back. My head was pounding with the rhythm of a searchlight. Little unseen creatures were starting to crawl on me.

I forced myself up, leaned for a moment on the shovel, then kept on digging. When I hit the coffin, renewed spirit gave me energy. The big box echoed hollowly as I scraped dirt away from it. By this time, just getting the loose dirt out of the hole was a chore, and I had to rest another four times before the coffin lid was clear. Then, with several tries, I smashed the fastenings with the shovel. I braced myself against the dirt walls in one corner of the hole, and pried it open.

Blackness gaped beneath the lid. The smooth padded satin of the coffin's interior only glistened on the sides; the bottom of the coffin, and its contents, were gone. I stood bent over the opening, motionless, staring into a deep hole.

Harsh, whispered laughter blew cold into my ear. I spun and then stiffened in horror. Above me floated the bare grinning skull, the death's

head ringed with just enough scalp to hang wispy golden hair, of the Death Angel. She hovered in my face on ratty white wings, with a smudged and tattered white gown flapping empty beneath her chattering jaw. Her breath sounded like a phonograph needle sliding across an old 45.

Stepping back in revulsion, I gripped the handle of the shovel and swung it hard, giving it all the strength I had left, pulling on the swing like a home-run slugger. The huge old blade of the shovel shattered the skull like it was cheap plastic and a faint whimpered cry escaped on the night wind. Yet on the slopes of soil around me, tiny bits of bone began to wriggle and grow anew.

I dropped the shovel into the hole and heard it land somewhere below the coffin. A high, melodic, peaceful singing came from within the earth.

I jumped.

I hit cold, packed earth not far down. The shock of landing hurt both my legs, and I fell. Pale light streamed down from above me. A huge darkened tunnel stretched before me.

The serene singing was clearer now and I thought I recognized the voices. As they approached, they stopped singing in unison and began to take turns.

"I wanted my baby...."

"I miss him...."

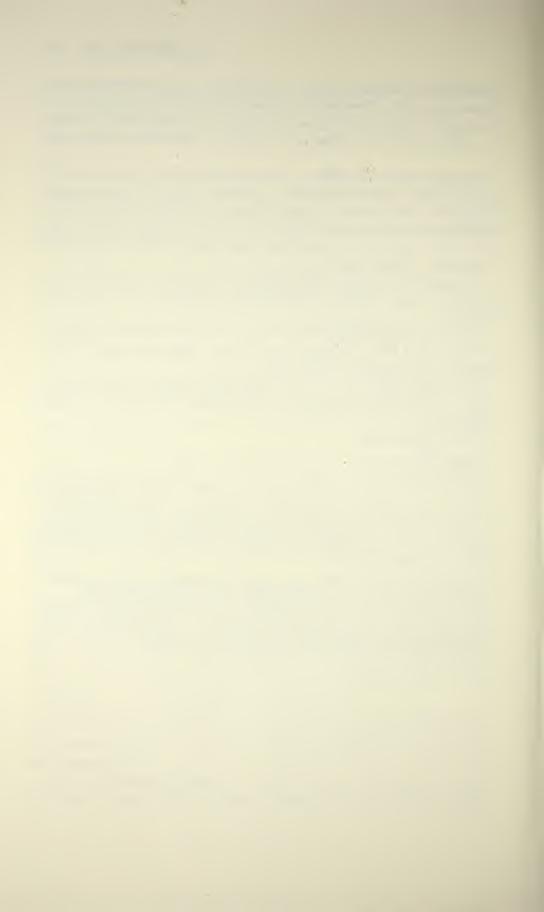
"I can't live. . . . "

Four vague shapes were walking toward me in the dim yellow light. A cool breeze floated from them, smelling foul to the point of sweetness.

As they came closer, the silhouettes came clear in the diffused glow from above me. Their shapes were familiar. Darkness hid their faces, but I saw them open their arms.

The singing had no words, now, but only a peaceful melody. I rose to meet them. Overhead, the strange light was gradually going out.

Yes, they could hear me; yes, they could see me. As though when slanted eyes like white women, slanted eyes die—only they don't, really. Death Angels came singing me a song, and I was home.



# Crystal

#### Charles L. Grant

According to the introduction to "Crystal" in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, where Charles L. Grant's first story appeared in 1968, "Crystal" is Grant's 100th short story sale. Not bad for a former New Jersey high school English teacher—and, considering the high quality of those 100 stories, a record any writer must envy. Not good enough for Grant, who is also a novelist and anthologist of note. To date he has written or edited over forty books, in addition to another twenty or so under various pseudonyms. Recent novels include The Pet and For Fear of the Dark; recent anthologies include After Midnight, Greystone Bay #3, and Shadows 10.

Born in Newark, New Jersey on September 12, 1942, Charles L. Grant shares with Ramsey Campbell a fascination with contemporary urban horrors (What is it about being born in depressing industrial cities?), although Grant's chosen milieu leans toward the middle-class, suburban bedroom-community of the American Northeast. But forget about that, since "Crystal" is set in the Bloomsbury area of London, as anyone who has ever strolled past Russell Square toward the British Museum will quickly recognize. Grant, like some other American authors, enjoys stopping in this part of London. So far he's always made it back to New Jersey.

THE SHOP WASN'T a very smart one as shops in the district went, but Brian had weeks ago learned that it catered mostly to tourists and the occasional country family in town for a holiday, and so needed only a bit of flash, a few items with the royal family on them, and a dozen different street maps from which to choose the best way of getting lost.

Now, Brian, he thought then in a silent scold, that's not the way to think, is it? This is London, boy, and you're practically a native. You're not going to get lost, you're not going to be shortchanged, you're not going to be taken for a foreigner at all. Until, that is, you open your fat Yank mouth.

His reflection in the shop window smiled wryly at him, and he nodded to it just as a young man and his girl wandered by, saw him, and gave him a puzzled look, the boy lifting an eyebrow and the girl shoving a laugh into her palm. Startled, he watched them until, if he wanted to watch them further, he'd have to look directly at their backs; so he stuffed his hands into his pockets and returned to his contemplation of the display.

Seeing nothing.

Hearing nothing of the homewardbound traffic grumbling past him on High Holborn.

Until a face in the window caught his attention. A young woman, striking in a dark-haired, pallid sort of way, and he smiled again, hopes rising, until he realized with a derisive snort it was a picture he was looking at. And not a very good one, at that. Oval, in fading color, framed in cheap silver.

He leaned closer.

No. Not cheap at all. In fact, the frame only appeared to be simple, but there around the edges were etchings of long-stemmed roses, so delicately done the sunlight blotted them out until he moved his shadow over their stems. He cocked his head and leaned closer still; he felt his left hand bunching around the roll of money he kept in his trousers; and when a horn blared behind him, he jumped and moved instantly and casually into the store.

The shopkeeper was a rotund man and thickly mustached. He remained behind the rear counter when Brian asked about the picture, saying that if he were interested, he was more than welcome to take it out of the window and bring it into the light. Brian shrugged. He didn't want to appear too stupid, nor too interested. Nevertheless, he made his way slowly back along the narrow aisle, angling sideways between a group of women chattering in Texas-Southern accents about how darling everything was and wouldn't Cousin Annie just love a picture of that adorable Prince Andrew. Carefully, he reached around a newspaper display and picked up the frame.

It was heavy, much heavier than it had a right to be.

He turned it around and looked at the portrait.

Narrow face; narrow chin; wide, dark eyes that matched the dark hair curling under her jaw. The hint of a lace-trimmed velvet bodice. Bare shoulders. Nothing more.

Attractive, he decided, but with an odd distance in her gaze.

He hefted it. Tilted it to the light when he felt the shopkeeper watching. Frowned as if in concentration and debate, shrugged as if in

reluctant decision, and carried it back, waiting patiently as the women fussed with the unfamiliar coinage, finally giving up and handing the man some bills, their faces sharp in daring him not to give them their due.

Brian grinned, and the man grinned back over a blue-tinted head. One of the ladies turned around and glared, obviously taking him for a local and extending the dare to him.

But he only nodded politely and handed over the picture as soon as the women moved on, chattering again, exclaiming, and wondering aloud why the English, with all their experience, didn't have money like the Americans, it would make things so much easier all around, don't you think?

"You must get tired of it, Mr. Isling," Brian said sympathetically as he pulled out his roll and coins and gave him the correct amount.

"Not so much anymore, Mr. Victor," was the smiling answer. "At least I don't have to put my feet up in a hotel, do I, when the day is over."

"Oh, they're not that bad." But his expression put the lie to it, and the man laughed, put the purchase in a paper bag, and thanked him for the sale.

Halfway up the aisle, Brian turned. "Do you know who she is?" he asked.

"Who?"

He held up the bag.

"No. Not really, that is. There's a name on the back. Crystal. I reckon that's either her or the artist."

"Do you get many of them?"

Isling hesitated, then shook his head. "Only one of that lot, far as I know. We get them now and then, the odd piece. Sometimes they last until I junk them; sometimes they go as soon as I put them out."

"And this one?"

"Put it out this morning."

"It must have known I was coming."

The shopkeeper's laughter followed him to the street, where he turned left, elbows in to protect his ribs from his dubious prize, trying to decide if he should go back to his room now, or find someplace to eat and examine his folly there. Wherever it was, it would have to be someplace quiet, someplace that would allow him peace, to figure out why the hell he'd spent so much on a whim.

He slid the frame just far enough out of the bag to take a puzzled look, heard someone scream a warning, and looked up in time to see a black, square-framed taxi jump the curb and head straight for him. He shouted

and leapt to one side, lost his balance and fell over the curbing into the street. The taxi plowed on, scattering pedestrians and postcard displays until it slammed through the window of the shop he'd just left. There was a man's yell, a faint whump, a whiff of gas, and suddenly the pavement was alive with smoke and fire.

Brian immediately crossed his arms protectively over his head, half expecting that any moment some fiery shard of metal would soon crash down on him, that glass lances would shred him. And he stayed on his side until he heard someone asking him if he was all right. Cautiously, he lowered his arms. Sirens were already blaring, and through the thick smoke he could see figures rushing about the shop with fire extinguishers hissing.

"Do you need help?"

He didn't object when hands cupped under his arms and pulled gently, until he gathered his feet beneath him and stood. He swayed a bit, and coughed. Someone brushed grime from his denim jacket, a piece of something from his hair, then led him away from the scene, talking all the while about the danger of living in the city these days, and if it wasn't the damned IRA or the damned Arabs, it was the damned taxis going wrong and he'd be damned if he didn't think the damned Apocalypse was coming.

Brian's eyes stopped their watering, but his right leg still hurt where he'd cracked it on the street, and his right shoulder felt as if it had been yanked from its socket. He groaned and gripped his arm, tensing with the anticipation of feeling the flow of blood.

"You need a doctor?"

After a moment he shook his head, closed his eyes tightly, and willed the pain to go away, come back later when he wasn't shaking so much. When he opened them again, his benefactor was gone and the police were already cordoning off the area. He walked off, still a bit wobbly but able to convince those who saw him that he wasn't drunk or crazy.

And it wasn't until he'd cut through Russell Square several minutes later and was heading toward his place near the university that he realized the bag was still clamped under his sore arm. A sign, he decided, and leaned against the nearest lamppost, took the picture out, and smiled at the woman.

"Crystal," he said, "why do I get the feeling you've just saved my life?" "Don't flatter yourself, boy. It was a mistake."

Brian nearly dropped the package at the voice, then whirled and scowled. "Melody," he said, "you could have taken ten years off me, sneaking up like that."

Melody Tyce only laughed, parts and sections of her rippling in accompaniment as she tried to get a closer look at what he was holding in his hand. "You talking to pictures now, Brian?"

Quickly, he tucked Crystal back into her bag and tucked it back under

his arm. "None of your business."

She laughed again and pushed coquettishly at the mass of blonde hair that ill-framed her pudgy face. She was much too large for so much atop her head, and, he thought, for the snug clothes she wore. It made her seem as if she were trying too hard, which he knew wasn't the case where he was concerned. She was a good-natured woman who had taken him under her wing, sending him to the restaurants where meals were good and just as good with their prices, to the shops where his clothes wouldn't look as if they'd fallen off the rack, and to the clubs where he might, were he more aggressive, even meet a young lady.

"Oh, come on," she persisted. "What do you have? Not one of those things, is it?"

"No," he said with a grin. "Something I picked up in a shop, that's all."
"Ah. A souvenir."

"Yes. Sort of."

She nodded. "Better. You're forgiven, then, for talking to yourself."

"I wasn't talking—" He made to ease her away, to give him some room, and the package slipped to the pavement. Instantly she pounced on it, and since the picture had slipped out of its covering, she was able to take a good look as she handed it back.

"Well, I'll be damned," she said.

"What?" He moved to her side and peered at the woman's face over her shoulder. "You know her?"

"I should." Her thumb ran along the frame, tracing the roses, while she sighed. "Where'd you get it, Brian?"

He told her.

She sighed again.

"Hey, what?" he said as she pushed it back into his hands and walked off. "C'mon, Mel, what gives?"

Midway down the block she stopped, shaking her head and looking up at the clean white facade of what had once been a Georgian townhouse, was now only one of several bed-and-breakfast hotels that lined the narrow street.

"Mel, what do you mean, you should know her?" Then he followed her gaze into the top-floor window, over the narrow entrance. "No," he said. "No, you're kidding."

"Clear as day, it's her."

They took the steps together, and he held the door, frowning but not wanting to push her with more questions. What she was claiming was clearly absurd—that the picture was of her mother, who lived in a large room two floors above the entrance and seldom showed herself to any of the guests. It couldn't be. She was, by his estimation after the one time he had seen her, well over eighty and almost as large as Melody herself.

At the back of the square foyer now used as a lobby was a large desk. Melody hurried behind it and dropped into a wing-back chair, slapped her hands on the blotter, stared at him without expression. "I gave that to Ben two weeks ago," she said. "Told him to take it to a friend that has a shop in Salisbury. He promised me he would."

"But why, if it's true?"

"Oh, it's true, Brian. And the why of it? Because she don't like seeing herself like that anymore. It makes her—"

"Oh," he said. "Oh, I see." And he supposed that seeing his own photograph, taken now, thirty years in the future would probably drop him into an unstoppable depression. "Oh, hell."

"It's all right," she assured him. "I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Bad pennies, if you know what I mean."

He said nothing more, just gave her a sympathetic look and started up the winding staircase toward his own room on the middle floor. And once inside, he flopped into his armchair and puffed his cheeks, blew out a breath, and set the picture on the table beside him.

"So," he said as he unlaced his shoes and kicked them under the bed. "So that's what you looked like, you old bat. Not bad. Mind telling me what happened?"

He laughed shortly, hoisted himself back up, and stripped to his underwear. There was a basin in one corner, and a mirror over it in which he saw the spreadings of a pair of marvelous bruises—one on his shoulder, another reaching up over his hip. Suddenly he began to tremble, and a chill of perspiration slipped over his chest and back. He coughed, he choked, and he barely made it to the toilet at the end of the hall before he lost his breakfast, and the bit of lunch he'd taken during his walk.

Ten minutes later he lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Delayed reaction, he thought, and almost immediately fell asleep.

Dreamless.

Long.

Waking shortly after sunset when a screech of brakes made him sit up, his breath short and his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.

"Jesus," he said, reached up and switched on the tiny light affixed to

the wall. The floor-to-ceiling windows were open, the curtains drifting with the breeze; the armchair a dark blotch in front of a fireplace bricked over, its shadow on the wall slightly wavering, as if under water.

He rubbed his eyes until they burned, then forced his fingers to relax, groaning when the aches, dull and throbbing, erupted along the side. He wondered if he ought not to see a doctor, and by the time he had decided it wasn't worth it, he was sleeping again.

Dreaming, this time, of phantom taxis and phantom drivers and old Ben Isling crushed to death behind his counter.

He spent most of the following day in the hotel, watching television, eating sandwiches, fussed over by Melody, who told him more than once that if he wanted to get rid of the picture, she could take it out to her friend in Salisbury herself. The other guests wandered in and out of the cozy front room, clucking, shaking their heads, giving him all the sympathy he required, until Melody finally laughed and told him he ought to charge admission.

But Bess didn't come. Bess Orbache, a young American like himself, using the city as a way to bury her past. Or so he thought each time she refused him a history, or even a hint. He hoped she was all right; he knew, however, she was more than all right, she was competent and confident and didn't need him for a squire.

On the third day, he walked to get the stiffness from his leg, had dinner and too much to drink at a pub he haunted, and finally, when there was no place to go, went to his bed.

And dreamed of taxis and explosions and something crawling black and wet through his window.

He woke with a start, blinking sleep away without sitting up. A few deep breaths to calm him, and he turned his head to the left, and saw the door to his room several inches ajar.

God, he thought, and felt himself grow cold, not once moving his gaze from the bit of hallway he could see. There was no one out there, not anymore, but he held his breath anyway, against the odd chance.

This is silly, you know, he told himself when he felt his shoulders trembling; you're just the victim of a beautiful woman who wanted to see your body before asking you to her suite at the Savoy for a night of—

Someone screamed.

"Jesus," he said, and leapt to his feet, wincing at the ache in his bruised leg as he stumbled back into his clothes. By the time he was dressed, the hallway was filling with those guests still at home, most of them crowding to the center stairwell. As best he could tell from the babble and the whispers, someone on the floor below had been discovered in

his room; murder, it was said, a throat cut and enough blood to paint most of one wall.

A young woman, shorter than he, her long brown hair touched prematurely with strands of gray, swayed a bit as the descriptions grew more graphic, and he put a hand on her back to prevent her from falling.

"I'm all right!" she snapped, then looked over her shoulder. "Oh, sorry, Brian. I thought it was Mr. White."

He smiled, tapped her once with a finger, and they backed away to a free corner. "Mr. White? Thanks a lot, Bess. It's just what I needed."

Her answering smile was more forced than easy, the faint spray of her freckles nearly vanishing in the attempt, and he leaned back against the wall, a hand in a hip pocket. Thurmond White was a lone traveler—fresh from Virginia, though he had no identifiable accent—with one eye out for bargains and the other out for lonely women. Bess, it seemed, was one of his prime candidates for either category, and twice Brian had to rescue her in the lobby by pretending they had a date. White hadn't been gracious, and hadn't given up the fight.

Bess, for her part, allowed him to take her to dinner both times, once more to the theater, once again to a film. Their good-nights were so chaste he wanted to scream.

They said nothing as they watched the dozen or so guests shift around for better views; they tensed when they heard the sirens stop outside, heard footsteps on the carpeted stairs, heard voices raised in authority.

"I don't think I want to talk to the cops," he said at last, and with a nod for her to join him, slipped back into his room.

She took the chair at once; he sat cross-legged on the bed.

"I heard you nearly caught it the other day," she said, staring around the room as if it were light-years different from her own down the hall. "Are you all right?"

He explained what had happened, didn't bother to exaggerate the injuries he'd received. She wasn't that impressed, though she didn't seem to mind that he couldn't stop looking at the T-shirt she wore—a thin one, and of a solid black that accentuated the tan of her bare arms and the curve of her chest. With a few variations, it was what she had worn since the first day he had met her; he assumed she had several of them and knew what they did.

Then he told her about waking up and finding the door open.

"Oh, my God," she said, sitting suddenly forward. "Brian, do you realize you could have been a victim? My God!" She scanned the room again, this time checking the shadows for a lurking killer. "My God!" And she was grinning.

A flare of light when the wind parted the curtains, and she looked to the side table and saw the picture of Crystal.

"Melody's mother," he said to her unasked question.

"You're kidding. That old bat?"

"So she says."

Bess reached for the frame, changed her mind with a frown, and suggested that he make sure he kept his door locked. When he told her he did, she reminded him it had been open.

"Or opened," she amended with a sly, menacing smile.

"Right," he said. "Now look, I don't know about you, but living dangerously makes me hungry."

"I already ate."

"Eat again."

She looked at him, considered, and nodded, then took his arm, stroked it once, and led him into the hall, where they were stopped by a constable who asked them if they'd mind looking in at the downstairs lounge, just a few questions, no problems, the inspector would take only a moment of their time.

Melody Tyce met them on the landing and looked at him strangely. The inspector took exactly ten minutes, thanked them, and took their names.

"I'll be damned," Bess said as they walked out to the street.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "Sooner or later one of his women was bound to catch on."

"You knew him well?" she asked dubiously.

"No. But White was the kind of guy . . . I don't know. The kind of guy who just travels around, seeing what he can get from where he is before going somewhere else. I don't know. Old before his time, you know what I mean?"

"Sure," she said, skipping a step. "Decadent."

He thought about it, and shook his head. "No. Just lost, I think."

"Ah," she said. "Very profound."

Maybe, he thought, and wondered if she knew how much the description seemed to fit him. If she did, she said nothing, and once their meal was over, they walked home in silence, not holding hands, not brushing arms, and when she skipped up the steps to her room he stood in the foyer shaking his head.

Was it something I said? he thought with a grin.

And thought about it again the next morning when Melody acted as if he had just contracted the plague. Her manner was stiff, her eyes blank when she looked at him, and as he headed out for a day trip to the Tower,

he looked back and saw her standing in the doorway, arms folded under her breasts.

From Traitor's Gate, then, to the armor museum, he walked through the tour and thought of nothing but Bess. She was getting to him. She was taunting him. The idea she was toying with him got him so mad that he returned to the hotel before he was ready and sat on the steps, waiting for her, ready to demand an explanation of her disinterest.

The sun set.

He went up to his room only once, to change clothes, and turned Crystal's face away when her eyes seemed to follow.

Back outside he sat again, hands on knees, seeing a patrol car pass and remembering Mr. White and Ben. I am, he thought then, pretty damn lucky after all.

A light switched on in a room overhead, and he looked up and back, and saw a shadow behind curtains. Melody's mother, and he rolled his shoulders in a shudder.

Bess showed up just after nine, smiled broadly when she realized he'd been waiting just for her, and nodded when all the dialogues he'd imagined came out as an invitation to a late dinner up the street.

They ate at the nearest Garfunkel's, neither of them wanting to walk very far, neither in the mood for anything fancy. She took a place on the wall-length booth, he the aisle chair. The only adventurous thing they attempted was switching plates when he was unable to face the bland meat he'd been served. And neither of them spoke of more than the cool weather, the bright skies, the tourists who seemed to be crowding into everything and not giving the true Anglophiles a chance to indulge, until Bess looked peculiarly at the veal she'd been nibbling.

"Something wrong?"

"The cheese," she said, her face abruptly pale, the freckles suddenly too dark.

He reached over with a fork and took a bit on a tine, tasted it with his tongue, and shrugged. "Seems all right to me."

She gagged and covered her mouth with her napkin, looking apologetic and near frightened at the same time. When she reached for and failed to grab her glass of water, he half rose and began to search for a waitress, looked back in time to see her slump to one side in the false leather booth. With a cry for help, he kicked back his chair and attempted to stretch her out along the seat. She moaned. He muttered encouragement and chafed her wrists, reached around and grabbed a napkin to dip into water when he saw the perspiration breaking over her brow.

A doctor pushed him aside.

Two minutes later she was dead.

Five minutes later the place was closed down, and within the hour he was standing in front of the hotel, looking up at the lighted window where Melody's mother lived. Questioned and released from the scene, the urge to wander had been suppressed in favor of a sudden macabre curiosity. He supposed, if he were inclined to believe in such things, that the portrait was some sort of good-luck charm; and right now it was difficult not to believe. The taxi, White's murder, the rat poison-tainted food; add them up and they tallied deaths that should have been his. Add them another way, however, and they tallied a run of good fortune that had nothing to do with anyone's likeness. Melody had said it herself, in fact—that she had gotten rid of it because her mother didn't like it. She called it a bad penny, which, to Brian's mind, had nothing at all to do with good luck.

The questions shifted as a shadow approached them.

He stepped back toward the curb, not bothering to look away.

The curtains parted just enough for him to see a slant of face, a slash of vivid blue, before they closed again and the shadow backed away.

He almost went in. He almost ran up the steps and slammed open the door. But a sudden image of Bess' stricken face loomed over the stoop, and he turned away and began walking—past buildings that even in the dark seemed a century out of place, past short-skirted girls who giggled softly in the shadows, past theatergoers in fine clothes, and belligerent shills who told him he'd better not wait, mate, if he didn't want to miss the city's greatest show.

He saw none of the neon, none of the headlamps, none of the faces that turned toward him and away.

Good luck, he thought sourly; what the hell kind of good luck was it for Bess, and Mr. White, and old Ben at the shop?

Coincidence.

Poisoned meat.

He was angry at himself for not feeling more sorrow at young Bess's dying, but he had hardly known her except as someone he couldn't have; he felt nothing at all for Thurmond White, in spite of the man's brashness and his ill-mannered ways; and Ben just happened to be standing where he was, at his post in the shop as the taxi crashed through.

Coincidence.

Good luck.

Bad pennies; and he whirled, nearly knocking over an old woman, and broke into a run that soon covered him with sweat, had his shift clinging to his chest, filled his shoes with slimy damp. The dark streets were quiet save for the slap of his soles; the last of the leaves hissed as he passed. Twice he had to dodge cars as he crossed in a street's center; once he had to outrun a dog he'd surprised rooting in garbage.

He ran back to the hotel and stood on the pavement, and when Melody

came to the door he only glared and nodded.

She had a sweater cloaked over her wide shoulders, and she fussed with the top button as she came down the steps.

"It's her," he said tightly, pointing at the window.

"I admit, it's unusual."

He could barely see her face, but he could sense her hesitant smile. "Unusual? Christ, Mel, it's impossible!"

She took his hand and tugged. When he resisted, she tugged again. "Won't hurt, Brian. It won't hurt to look."

He shook off her grip, but followed her just the same, into the lobby, up the stairs, through the fire door and around to the front. She knocked and tilted her head, gave him a smile and walked in, and he rode with her on her shadow.

A single bed, a single chair, a dresser on the far wall.

A crystal chandelier that blinded him until he squinted.

Melody stood beside him.

The other woman stood with her back to the curtains.

She wore a red velvet nightdress trimmed in faint gold, a complement to the ebony that spilled over her shoulders. Her face told him she was sixty, perhaps even thirty; her hands told him she was thirty, perhaps even twenty; and she was as far from fat as he was from content.

She was the woman in his picture, framed by the silvered drapes.

"She tries very hard, my granddaughter does," said the woman named Crystal, in a soft, whipping voice. "Her mother was no better."

He heard Melody sobbing; he didn't look around.

"I suspect she took a fancy to you, a little before I did." The smile was brief and cold. "For different reasons, of course. She fancies she loves you."

He did look then, and looked away from the tears; then reached behind him for the doorknob. "You're crazy," he said.

"You're alive," she told him.

He snorted, courage returned when he wasn't looking in her eyes. "Look, lady—"

"You're here," she said quietly, "because you've no place else to go, isn't that so? No home. No family. You live in the past, and England is perfect for ambitions like that. And so do I, Brian. So do I." The rustle of velvet. "My past, not yours."

He yanked the door open and stepped into the hall; and once out of the wash of white light, he took a deep breath, and shuddered, and headed for the stairs. It was time, he thought, to move on. Another city, perhaps the Continent. Maybe even go back to the States. It didn't matter as long as he didn't stay here.

Melody hurried up behind him.

"Tote the tab," he said as he climbed toward his room. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

"You don't get it yet, do you?" she said.

"Get it?" He looked down. "C'mon, Mel, you know me."

She wiped her nose with a sleeve. "Do you know who had that picture before you?"

"You did. You told me."

"No. Not me. Mr. White."

He blinked, and grinned. "Mel, this isn't the time. I—"

"I killed him."

He fumbled for the banister and lowered himself to the step. "You didn't."

"She was tired of him." With a few exceptions, he was growing to like older women."

"So?"

"Older women, Brian, don't have much time left."

He stood angrily. "Jesus, Mel, what the hell are you pulling here, huh?" His eyes closed, and opened. "Oh, I get it. Your grandmother has the power to take what life is left from a person, right? She then gives that portrait to someone, and it brings them good luck—like not dying when they should." He spread his hands. "No problem, Mel. If it'll make you feel better, I'll leave it behind. O.K.? Are you happy?"

He started up again (*my past*) and reached the landing, then turned around (*not yours*) because he saw the cab, and the blood, and young Bess on a stretcher.

"Let me get this straight," he said to Melody, who was still waiting. "You arranged, somehow, for me to get the picture because Mr. White didn't pick the girls, he picked older women?"

"You were the type," she said. "She always knows the type."

"And . . ." He put a finger to his chin. "And no matter where I go, because of me people are going to die just to keep her where she is."

Melody lifted a helpless hand.

"You," he said, "are insane. So is that imposter in there, or was the old woman the fake?"

He pulled open the fire door—

"Brian, how did you feel when poor Bess was dead?"

—and stepped into the hall, snatched his key from his pocket, and slammed into his room.

He didn't turn on the lights.

He didn't look at Crystal's picture.

He stood at the window and stared down at the street through the gauze of the curtains.

What a stupid thing to say, he thought, spinning the key in one hand; I felt lousy, I felt rotten, I felt . . .

And he knew then what Crystal wanted.

Not the dead, not the dying, but the fact that good old Brian, like Thurmond White, would never really care.

A polite knock on the door.

"What!" he said as a tour coach drifted by.

"The bill," Melody said. "Do you still want it?"

A pair of young women in jeans and down jackets huddled on the opposite pavement, knapsacks at their feet, and they were studying a map.

"Brian?"

"No," he said loudly, and parted the curtain.

One of them looked up and saw him, poked her companion, and they smiled.

He heard Melody shift the picture so it faced his bed.

"Brian, she's waiting."

Girls, he thought; they're not much older than girls.

He watched them without expression, watched their flirting and their intent, and when he nodded at the last, the light in the room above switched off, and he waited.

Listening to the girls hurry over to the door.

Listening as Melody left to let them in.

Waiting, and sighing, because he didn't feel a thing.

## Retirement

### Ron Leming

Ron Leming is another writer struggling out of the pack of small press writers. His stories have appeared in Potboiler, Sycophant, Twisted, The Horror Show, Eldritch Tales, and other leading small press magazines, and he has had recent sales to professional markets such as Mayfair and Outlaw Biker (from which the following story is reprinted). Leming is also a small press editor with the Damnations anthology series and the forthcoming Slice of the Razor. Just at this moment he is concentrating on his budding career as an artist.

Ron Leming says that he was supposedly born on September 11, 1950, but doesn't know where, as he is an orphan. As for his background: "Just out of high school I went into the music business and played in several well-known bands during the sixties. I've been an actor in very cheap, very bad B movies, a chef, a biker, a gas station manager, a professional full contact martial arts fighter and instructor, owned my own restaurant, built custom vans, dug ditches, flown planes, worked for a year as a mortician's assistant . . . . I love cats, sex, drugs and rock and roll. Presently I'm playing in a rock and roll band called CHAINSAW REDEEMER. Part punk, part metal, and all hardcore rock and roll." Isn't it amazing just how many horror writers like cats?

"I WANT TO BE laid out nice and neat on my stomach," Jack said, "with my pants down around my ankles so everybody can kiss my ass goodbye."

"Jack," Chell said reproachfully.

"Well," Jack said, "it's true." He took another drink of Rebel Yell and looked lustfully at Chelly, behind the bar. "What about you?" he asked. "How do you want to be buried?"

Chell was my best waitress—my only waitress. It was an exceptionally slow night at Diamond Dog's—a very slow bar, at best—and how we'd gotten round to talking about death and burial, I'll never know. It had just seemed to come up in the conversation. I wouldn't be the one to object, though. DD's was all I had—since my wife had died—so my

customers and neighbors and regulars were my friends, and I depended on their good will to fill my time and stimulate my mind. Not a good life,

maybe—but life enough.

"I don't rightly know," Chell said. "I never thought about it much. I guess I'll just do whatever everybody else is doing when the times comes—'cept maybe with a little less money." She laughed and slapped Jack lightly on the shoulder. "Us poor folks cain't afford to die, you know, Jack? We just get so damn depressed that we cain't move no more. Then they wrap us up and dump us in a hole. Easy enough, eh?"

Jack snorted as if the answer hadn't had imagination enough for him and he turned to me. There was only the three of us in the bar. It was near midnight and the weather outside was gettin' real unfit. A slow night

at a slow bar, like I said.

"What about you, Don? How do you want the deed done?"

"Me?" I answered, pretending to think while I dried an unused beer glass. "My daddy always told me I was too downright mean and nasty to die. I'm just gonna cut loose with a big ole fart someday and that'll be it. I'll collapse like a sack of Jello and seep away into the ground."

Chell bent over laughing, and I smiled, but that answer wasn't enough

for Jack.

"C'mon, Don," he said, pushing. "Really now—how do you want it done?"

I thought for a moment, recalling what my "real" serious answer was. "Oh, I guess I'd want to be cremated, you know. Have my ashes hauled around in some nice Chinese jug—put up a tasteful brass plaque somewhere. Have it read, 'I knew something like this was going to happen'."

"There you go," Jack said, lifting his glass to me. "That's the spirit. Why be serious about it? Hell, it's only death, after all. Nothing to worry

about."

Jack shut up for a moment. He was an insurance salesman, and he could be a real pain in the ass, sometimes. Besides, I had been serious—and it hurt a little for him to think I was joking about what I wanted done. But he gulped the rest of his drink down and turned to Chelly for a refill. It was all dusty-windy outside, the hot summer wind picking up the desert sand and playing attack civilization with it. A little Rebel Yell went a long way toward giving a man like Jack the courage to face the desert and go home to an unhappy marriage with a semblance of a smile on his face because maybe things ain't as bad as they look sober. Even if, as Jack did, he lived only a block from the bar.

Chell took his glass and began to pour from the thick-necked R.Y. bottle. When the front door slammed open she spilled some on the

counter. I looked at it for a moment and thought Damn. That'll take the varnish off.

And it suddenly grew chillingly hot. I thought it was only the wind and wet and emptiness from the storm outside. Thunder cracked and lightning flashed. I sure wasn't looking forward to the drive up the mountain home.

Everyone's eyes were on the stranger. You could almost see the dust fall off him as he seemed to shake himself. He stomped his feet up and down to knock the wet dirt off them. He was all dressed in black-black boots, black jeans, black shirt, black jacket and a big, shiny black Stetson hat which he held in one hand as he brushed his hair down with the other. He wasn't no local, that was for sure-else I'd have seen him before.

"C'mon in, partner," I said. "Have a seat and a shot to make yourself comfortable."

I like to try to be friendly with newcomers. Jack and Chelly were looking at him like they thought he was a man from Mars or some such. I figured him for an old biker-cowboy, sort of like a tourist, but not in as much of a hurry. Or else he'd just ended up in Satan's Rockpile by accident—some of 'em still did that since they'd moved the freeway.

He stomped on over to the bar and hunkered up onto the chair right next to mine. That gave me a chance to study him a mite closer. He was an odd lookin' fella—all dry skin and chapped bones and angles—road worn-elbows and knees stickin' out like the vanes of a ramshackle windmill. One of those fellas that don't look like they belong in the body they're wearing.

He looked like he hadn't had a decent meal in a week, maybe more. His cheekbones were red and raw and high, and his eyes were sunk tired and deep. Under his hat, his head was nearly bald, with only a few stringy ropes of tangled blond hair hangin' down at the sides and back—long and straggly. A pitiful lookin' cuss, all in all. It looked like he had let himself go a long time ago, bone tired. A little like I felt sometimes.

Chelly sidled on over to him, wiping the counter off with the towel she keeps hangin' out her back pocket and settin' a napkin down in front of him. She was a good ole girl and a crack waitress.

I heard a little tremble in her voice when she asked, "What'll it be?" that made me think this stranger had upset her, or frightened her, though I didn't know why.

"I'll have a beer," the stranger said, "a Grizzly beer."

His voice was low and deep and hoarse, as if he'd been riding for miles and years in the throat-ripping desert heat.

Jack came suddenly to life. "Hey, buddy," he said tentatively. "Where you from?"

The stranger looked at him oddly. "Where am I from?" he asked with a sigh. "Well, I guess you could say I'm from all over. From Texas, originally—but I've been many places since then. All over the world."

"Iz'zat a fact," Jack commented, brightening up. "What do you do for

a living?"

The stranger sighed and took a long drink of his beer. I was surprised to see the glass was empty when he set it down on the bar again. I signaled to Chell to fill it again—which she did—while he continued.

"I suppose," he said—a little sadly, I thought, "I suppose you could

call me an undertaker, of a fashion. I deal in death, at any rate."

Jack's face beamed like he'd just found a flapping catfish on a muddy bank and was determined to lie and say he'd caught it himself. Course, he'd throw it up in the air, first. Some of Jack's best customers were undertakers.

"Well," he said, "that's a strange coincidence. Just when you came in, we were all talking about that very subject—death and burying, I mean. We were all saying just how it was we all wanted to be laid out and buried." Jack smiled again, rather maliciously, and his gaze rested intensely on the man. "What about you, Mister . . . ah, what'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't," the stranger said, giving out with a short, cackling laugh. "But you may—if you must—call me Spider. Spider Ransome."

"Well, Mister Spider. What about you? How do you want to be done up?"

"Oh, I suppose I'd prefer to be burnt. It seems so clean. There's just something comfortable and purifying about the flames."

"You'd have something in common with Don, then. He feels like he wants to be cremated, too."

The stranger turned to me—there was a hungry, curious look on his face. I stared into his eyes—deep and black—and for a moment, I was afraid. Don't know why, but even after the fear passed I was still uneasy.

"Indeed!" he said. "Is that true?"

"Yep," I answered. "Leastways, I think so. To tell you the truth, I ain't plannin' to die at all, if I can help it. You know? But if I have to, I guess I'd prefer to be cremated. I know I don't relish the idea of bein' planted in the ground—not this damn ground, anyway. I'd be afraid of what might grow from outta me."

The stranger didn't crack a smile or raise an eyebrow—just looked at me all serious-like.

"A commendable attitude, friend. Very sane. But . . . you don't have

to at all, you know,"

"What?" I asked. I was a little high from the three glasses of beer I'd drunk, and I didn't quite understand what he'd meant. "Don't have to be planted?"

"No," he said in a whisper, "you don't have to die."

He looked at me expectantly. Chell was just starting to pour Jack another glassful and they were talking to one another, ignoring the stranger and I. Chell caught me looking at her and raised an eyebrow, but I signaled her that it was okay and her attention wandered back to Jack. I leaned closer to the stranger so I could hear him better. "Would you say that again, partner?" I asked him. "I don't think I heard you quite right."

He smiled at me and drank the rest of his second beer. He smacked his lips and sighed. "You. Don't. Have. To. Die," he said. "Not at all. Not

I suddenly felt, somehow that I was going to vomit my boots up from my throat. I swallowed hard and looked straight at him. "Whad'ya mean, mister? And what was it you said your name was?"

"My name has no relevance," he said. "I have been called many things. Been called a son-of-a-bitch and worse. But you, Don—you may call me Death."

"Shit!" I laughed. "How many bars you been to tonight, partner?"

"This is my first," he said—and he was dead serious. "This is my first stop of the night. And," he said, draining the remains in his glass, "with luck, it'll be the last,"

I tapped him a new glass of Grizzly and he sipped at the froth and sighed.

"I'm tired," he said. "I've been looking for a replacement. Looking for someone—someone just like you—so I could retire."

"Retire—mister, you're crazy. Show how much you know. Death don't retire. Takes a vacation now and then—like in that film, Death Takes a Holiday. But retire? Mister, you're crazier than a rustler with a prairie dog down his pants."

The stranger just laughed. "No," he said. "I assure you, Don, I'm not." He grinned—an impossibly toothy, ear-to-ear grin. The flesh was beginning to flake away from his face like ancient peels of skin from a healing sunburn. His cheekbones shone through, white and shiny, as if he had no blood. I could smell the odor of over-ripe meat and his eyes were turning glassy and gelid—the pupils expanding into blackness.

"Truly," he said. "I'm old—older than you could ever imagine. Well,

maybe not that old, but I have been Death for a long time—a very long time."

The stranger sighed and seemed to slump in his chair until he looked nearly as old as he claimed to be. He drained the last of his beer and pushed the empty glass away with his spider-leg-thin fingertips.

"It is someone else's turn, now. It's time for new blood—new attitudes. Time for me to lay my burdens down, lay my soul down. I have given more service than was asked for, and I am tired of making decisions. I offer it to you—that you become what I am."

I sputtered for a moment while I caught my breath and calmed my stomach. "And what if I don't want to take you up on it?" I asked. I looked over at Jack and Chell for help and what I saw pulled me off my stool and set me up on my feet. They were frozen in place—as if time had stopped. Jack's mouth was open and even the flow of light amber liquid from the R.Y. bottle had solidified in mid-pour. That was what finally convinced me he wasn't crazy.

"If you refuse," he said before I had a chance to ask him what the hell was going on, "then I will simply find someone else. I have all the time in the world. It's not an easy task to find just the right replacement—but I found you. I will find others." He paused, looked at the watch on his bony wrist, and reached around the bar to draw himself another glass of Grizzly. He drained it in one drink, set it down and continued.

"Before you decide, let me tell you something. In," he looked once again at his watch, "exactly one-and-a-half minutes, this bar will be hit by the worst lightning bolt of the storm. It will catch fire and everybody within will die. That means you—and Chelly—and Jack, over there. Everyone."

"How can I believe that? Believe you?"

The skin had shredded from his face and hands until he was, now, no more than skin and bones. There was a dark shining, just beyond sight, deep within the black eyesockets of his skull. I should have been surprised or scared, but I wasn't. I'd half been expecting it.

"What would you have me do?" he whispered darkly. "Pull a rabbit from my hat? Disintegrate every piece of glass in the bar? Call up a demon? Should I line the dead up in front of you to testify? I can do these things, and more."

"No," I said. Even without the fact that he was all bones now, rattling around in loose black clothes, the sight of Jack and Chell and that stream of Rebel Yell, all frozen in time while I was still moving, was enough to convince me. Either that or I had gone crazy. "I believe you," I said. "I believe you."

"Then what will your choice be, Don? Would you be Death and live forever—or would you prefer your life to end with those of your friends?"

I thought—harder than I had ever thought before. No kind'a weird shit had ever happened to me-Don DuPress, biker, redneck and all round wastrel. I was just a broken down bar-keep. Stuff like this only happened to people in the Twilight Zone, or on Billy Bob's Nightmare Theatre—not in real life—and surely not to me.

I didn't want to die—I knew that real surely. Hardly had to think about that at all. And life after death, Heaven and Hell, a just and wrathful God—all that had hardly been real to me. I'd just tried to get along and take the crap that life handed out as best as I was able. But when a man came into my bar, stopped time, shed his skin, told me he was Death— The Death—and told me I only had a minute-and-a-half to live . . . well, that I paid attention to.

"I'll bite," I said, hardly able to talk but all whispery and quiet-like. "Okay, partner. You got yerself a deal."

Death sighed. "Thank you," he said, his voice stronger. The flesh began cohering to his bones again, filling out his clothes and face. I felt a sucking, deep in my soul. "Finally," he said, smiling. "Finally. Thank you."

I reached to shake the bubbling hand he held out. I touched him. There was a tearing crack, and a buzz that made my brain feel like Jell-o that had set in the icebox too long and turned watery, confused and a little green. I saw Jack and Chelly fall to the floor and lie still. The bottle of Rebel Yell lay on its side, emptying its contents onto the top of the bar while it slowly rocked back and forth.

There was a smell of burnt wood and sulfur. Heat radiated from all around me. My feet were numb and vibrating against the floor as the muscles in my legs and stomach convulsed.

I fell, too. Then there was a shift, a painful, yet comforting jerk that I felt deep in my stomach, and I was standing in the middle of the room, looking down at a body on the floor. It was choking and jerking and clawing at its throat and eyes. When flames began licking the weathered, wooden plank walls of the bar, their light showed me that it was myself I was looking at. It was me—or what I had been, before.

I lifted my hands to my face-touched the skin that clung, newly formed, there, unfeeling of the heat.

I was dressed all in black; black boots, black jeans, black shirt, black jacket. And skinny, like my bones were rattling around in a bloodless shell. It was strange enough, but somehow more comfortable than my own, overweight, rundown, underattractive body had been. I figured I could go far with a thing like this.

#### 558 Ron Leming

I picked my black Stetson hat up from the bar and put it on slowly—adjusted the angle and the sit. I started to bend down to touch my blistering body, lying on the floor—thought better of it—and walked through the flames into the dust and wind outside. He had gotten what he'd wanted, and so had I, sorta.

There was a black Harley in the dirt parking lot, I knew it was mine, now. I walked over to it and as I sat down it barked once and started. It ran with a deep purr, quiet and sneaky-like. I pulled the clutch in and kicked it into gear—grabbed a handful of the accelerator and let 'er rip. The tires lifted from the ground and I was soaring in the air, flying. The bike and I stretched out, molded together, and I was coasting on a multitude of bright, glowing lines of energy like a freeway of spinning stars.

But I knew where I was going. I didn't need no road signs. I knew what I had to do. And I knew, now, that I had a long, long time to do it. I was Death—and Death rides the sky forever.

# The Man Who Did Tricks With Glass

### Ron Wolfe

Ron Wolfe was born on September 14, 1945 in North Platte, Nebraska—the celebrated hometown of Buffalo Bill Cody and where, Wolfe says, his grandmother once saw Buffalo Bill ride a white horse into a saloon. While he was too young to join up with Cody, Wolfe did follow in the same line of work as his father, writer Ed Wolfe, whose stories were popular in Collier's, The Saturday Evening Post, American, and other magazines of the '40s.

Ron Wolfe now lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he is a feature writer, movie reviewer, and cartoonist for The Tulsa Tribune. He has had stories published in Twilight Zone Magazine, Night Cry, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and Stardate. Wolfe has co-written one novel, Old Fears (with John Wooley), which is set in Oklahoma and is currently under option to Paramount Pictures. He is at work on a couple of other novels, one suspense and the other straight horror. This story, from the final issue of Stardate, was begun some years ago as an attempt "to write a Charles Beaumont-type story," Wolfe says; Stardate credited it with "a sharp Bradbury touch." Good company, but the finished product stands very well as a Ron Wolfe story.

THE METAL CLICK-CLACK studs in the soles of his boots rattled like hailstones against the mirrored floor under the mirrored ceiling adjoining the mirrored walls. "Joobie! And o-yes, but this is the place," he said to himself and himself and himself.

"The place of the Mirrormaster, o-yes," the Sec-robot machine echoed Birdie Rawson's voice from the mirror-topped desk in the center of the room. "Count yourself reflected here 1,114 times."

Some where just simple reflections. Some overlapped. Some wavered. Some made him different, in different ways. Evil and innocent, childlike, ancient, scarred, healed.

Birdie Rawson, however, lost count at himself times 53 when the mirror-faced panel to his left, or maybe right, or possibly it was behind him—anyway, went *swipp-p-ppp!* and opened, with a flash of light that made the diamond-faceted walls glitter. And the room count doubled.

"You!..." Rawson peered through eyes of ice and water, into the chromium brilliance. Black-gloved and balding, he clapped like a seal. "You are real-o, after all."

"I am real, and I am worn out, Mr. Rawson," the Mirrormaster said. The silver of his hair shone bright as glass. "I meant to be retired."

"But for me, you are here."

J. Tipton Witt, last of the Mirrormasters, took his place behind the desk, sat down and made the rings on his fingers sparkle, drumming on the desktop.

"Yes, Mr. Rawson," he said, "for you."

"In the interest of easing these tensions between us..." Rawson said, and withdrew a sealed envelope from one of several zippered pockets that ornamented the front of his jacket. He placed the envelope on the desktop.

"I am holding back nothing," Rawson said. "See for yourself."

The Mirrormaster slid the envelope, barely touching it, into a slot that opened almost invisibly. A whirring, a grinding sound followed.

"I don't need to see," the Mirrormaster said. "I don't believe you."

"Most people don't," Rawson said. "But I am not hurt. It helps me to get what I want."

"What you want is not the first of our discussions," the Mirrormaster said. "What I want is. And what I want is this, simply said, Mr. Rawson: to be left alone by the likes of you. I don't give a twit for your blackmail. I am not the least concerned about the case that you've managed to fabricate against me. What does interest me . . . is that it must have cost you for lies almost what I charge for mirrors."

Rawson nodded. "I pay for the best."

"And that kind of payment, Mr. Rawson, is what I need for purpose of disappearing. Understand: it is going to cost you unreasonably, whatever you want done."

Again, Rawson nodded happily, and his head bobbed back at him from 1,114 different angles.

"Moreover," said the Mirrormaster, "since this, in fact, will be the last job I take, I do dearly hope you can make it something of a challenge." He gestured palms up toward Rawson, as if to have something cold and oozing dropped into his hands. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"I had in mind, o-yes—something for the bedroom," Rawson said.

The Mirrormaster said flatly, "Oh."

"Something . . . something different . . . something joobie."

The Mirrormaster slumped. "In that case, Mr. Rawson, be it known that you have forced me out of retirement to perform the equivalent of

playing with my toes. Something for the bedroom. Pfah!"

Rawson click-clacked across the mirrored floor to lean against the desk, with his California plum nose thrust into the face of the Mirrormaster and his earrings dancing a ballet for silk sheets and fake fur. "So tell me what you can do for me," he said.

The Mirrormaster snorted again. "Anything." He pushed Rawson back. "I can make you look two feet taller and muscled as if you were carved out of ivory. I can put shapes on her to give you thoughts even you would be ashamed of. Again, pfah! You can't believe what old stuff this is to me."

But Rawson pressed in. "And you could make her float like a sea nymph out of the sea?"

The Mirrormaster nodded and bit off his thumb nail.

"And you could make six of her, and three of me, and two of us both?" The Mirrormaster coughed and spat.

"And you could make her seem nothing but soft, questing lips?"

"All of those," the Mirrormaster said, "in one afternoon. Easy installation. Name the day."

The corners of Rawson's mouth bent up slowly then, like something crawling out from under his mustache. "Then if you can do all that, glass man," he said, "maybe you can do the thing I want done."

To which J. Tipton Witt sighed a breath of cold oatmeal and rain. "What I have always hated about this particular facet of my work, Mr. Rawson," he said, "is that it gives me no choice but to find out, in sordid detail, your idea of a good time in bed."

"Well-o . . ." Rawson glanced back and forth and up and down, and his own look of sudden distrust ricocheted back at him. "We are alone?" he asked.

"We are."

Slowly, Rawson loosened another of the zippered pockets. He withdrew from it a badly-taken photograph, which he placed in front of the glass man.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Rawson said.

The Mirrormaster did not answer immediately. But his face changed in ways that might have been imperceptible except in such a place of mirrors and lights. The black-dot pupils of the Mirrormaster's eyes, already small, narrowed as if to blind him to the sight of the photograph.

He turned the photo face-down with a hand that might not have been

seen to tremble, except for the unsteady glimmer of mirrored light against so many rings.

Rawson flipped the picture—snap/slap!—again, to confront the Mirrormaster. "Her name was Lela," Rawson said. "As femies go, I miss her terribly. Lovely, don't you think? Even after..."

"I don't want to know." The Mirrormaster's voice cracked. It broke like crystal. "How you did . . . to her . . ."

Rawson edged in closer. "Call it, on my part, a fascination with gadgetry."

The Mirrormaster flinched back in his chair, wheezing at the smell of joobie-joobie seeds on Rawson's breath. He snapped the crystal button on the Sec-robot, and said, "Mr. Rawson will be leaving now." And to Rawson: "Tragically, there are limits to what I can do with glass. I cannot build a prison of glass that would hold you."

Rawson clubbed an arm across the desk, smashing the machine. "Neg-o, I'm staying, and you are going to listen to me, glass man." He smiled then—a smile of bloodied teeth from where the seeds had cut into the gums.

"I want her returned to me, glass man," Rawson said. "Not alive again. I didn't like her all that much alive. But I want the image of her—there in the mirrors, in the glass, beckoning to me. I want the reflection of me, the reflection of her, intertwined. You see... I wasn't finished with her."

The Mirrormaster stood. He turned as if to look away from Birdie Rawson, but the mirrors allowed no such avoidance. "I am . . . finished with you," the Mirrormaster said.

Rawson persisted, "You said you wanted a challenge."

"Yes, but . . ." And, for a moment, again, the face of the Mirrormaster shifted—tightened ever so subtly, to an expression that could have been read as fear, or surprise, or contempt. But not disinterest.

"Can you do it?" Rawson pressured.

"I can . . . tinker with reflections, Mr. Rawson. What you ask, is to conjure a ghost."

"So the answer to my question—the one-word answer from the last of the glass men—is a big phoo!" Rawson said.

"I didn't say that," the Mirrormaster countered. "What I mean is, it hasn't been tried."

"So, I tell you," Rawson said: "Try. Dare. Plunge. Be, not the follower, but the artist."

J. Tipton Witt ruffled his silvery curls like the idea itself was a bug in his hair. "And if I don't?..."

"I will go out and tell the world what a fake you are, and it will have the ring of truth to it, glass man."

"And if I do?..."

"Then, I will see to it that you become rich, revered—and rid of me. I will put all three in writing to your complete satisfaction."

Silence filled the room like mirrors.

The Mirrormaster again contemplated the woman's photograph.

"I can see in her eyes. She died hating you," the Mirrormaster said. "So will I."

But he took from the desk drawer a long, silver-colored pencil and a pad of paper, and began drawing arrows and angles and little dotted lines criss-crossing this way and that, and muttering to himself about "angle of incidence" and "angle of deviation."

"By 'deviation,' " Rawson said, "I hope you mean nothing personal."

"Get out," the Mirrormaster ordered.

"Joobie! O-yes, I will be anxious to hear from you." Rawson said, and his boots, departing, rattled applause for the work so auspiciously begun.

It was a week later that J. Tipton Witt motioned a crew of workmen into Birdie Rawson's bedroom, and the door closed.

After a while, the workmen left, but the Mirrormaster stayed inside, and the door closed again.

Rawson rapped and called, "When can I see?" But all he heard from the other side was the sound of shattering glass.

And when the door finally did edge open, casting a flicker of brilliance into the hallway, the Mirrormaster squeezed through in the smallest space he could. He slammed and locked the door shut behind him. His eyes were cobwebbed with red; his mouth ticked and trembled.

"Yes?..." Rawson rushed him. "Is it done? Is she there? I have certain ... plans ... I am eager to put in motion."

Bits of Birdie Rawson reflected off the beads of sweat that streamed from the Mirrormaster's brow.

"Something . . . not her," the Mirrormaster said. "What I made in there, in the glass . . . I don't know where it came from. I can't describe it, you wouldn't want it, and I'm leaving," the Mirrormaster said, trying to edge past Rawson.

Rawson's black-gloved seal hands clasped the old man's throat before J. Tipton Witt could take another step away. "Neg-o, you don't, glass man. I paid you plenty. What you're telling me is that it needs more work, and I'm telling you more work is what it's going to get," and he shoved the Mirrormaster, hard, against the door.

J. Tipton Witt saw Rawson's fingers clenching and unclenching and

smelled the joobie-joobie sweetness on Rawson's breath stronger than ever, and he unlocked the door and eased back inside.

Rawson went about his business the rest of the day, ignoring the screams and the shattering sounds.

And when the door opened again, there was J. Tipton Witt, shaking and tattered, arms and face criss-crossed with delicate, bleeding cuts, and all the same—very much the Mirrormaster. "I have done it," he said. "You can see for yourself."

Rawson jumped for the door, but J. Tipton Witt stopped him with an outstretched hand. "The thing is," J. Tipton Witt said, "I still don't know how. I still don't like it. I'm still leaving. And my advice to you, Mr. Rawson, is to do the same."

Rawson pushed him aside and went in.

Rawson's voice drifted out of the room then like soft clouds and soap suds. "Ohh-h-h. O-my. It is her, glass man, And so many of her. And so many angles, and she is beckoning to me, glass man. Ahhh!..."

The Mirrormaster did not follow, did not watch, only called into the room. "And does she float like a sea nymph out of the sea?"

"O-yes!"

"And are there six of her, and three of you, and two of you both?"

"Even more, and even better."

"And does she seem nothing but soft, questing lips?"

"Questing . . ."

"And what of her touch, Mr. Rawson? What of that?"

The answer was silence.

The Mirrormaster closed the door. He walked to the end of the hallway, almost there before the door clicked open behind him.

The voice that stopped him was not Rawson's. It was the whisper of slowly splintering glass, taking the shape of a single word.

He turned toward the sound.

The word repeated—"Mirrormaster"—out of the lips that bore the glint of ice.

Turning, the Mirrormaster saw himself reflected in the silvered glass of Lela's eyes. She touched him, gently, on the cheek. He felt the nail cut, knowing it would leave a scar as fine and white as a length of thread.

"I could only reflect what was there of you," the Mirrormaster said. "Hatred..."

She smiled at him, lips glistening. "But, oh, won't you say that I'm lovely?"

She twirled for him, naked, and almost transparent.

"Lovely," the Mirrormaster agreed.

"Then, come." She took his hand. It bled within her grasp. "See the rest of what you've done."

She led the way back to the bedroom, softly pushing the door open.

The room stood silent, empty, and yet filled with those gaping-mouthed screams that came out of the mirrors.

"You see, Mirrormaster?" Lela said. "You could, after all, build a prison of glass that would hold him."

"A prison . . . "

"But not a lonely one." Lela touched a glass-edged nail to the tip of her tongue—a thousand nails, a thousand tongues. A thousand Lelas, intertwined, reflected from the mirrored floor under the mirrored ceiling adjoining the mirrored walls.

She smiled a radiant, lovely smile, a smile of the coldest white.

The Mirrormaster grasped a workman's hammer from the floor. He struck the wall blindly, ignoring the sting of slivered glass. And again, and again: the impact of a thousand gleaming hammers in the hands of a thousand silver-haired madmen.

The glass cracked; it shattered; it fell.

And every broken, bloodied shard of it, every large, every small, every sharp-edged reflection—all of them, Birdie Rawson—kept on screaming.



with the wheelchair cases. "We're supposed to be strictly Protective Custody and Placement. But since the Governor cut the Social Services budget we get a lot of Disabled, Drug Rehab, the overflow from Juvie, you name it. They'd better not send us any more. We're already sleeping six to a room."

"My Erin's not one of these," Casey told him.

"You never know," he said.

Last off were three squat, overweight, moon-faced kids. They held hands and laughed and stuck out their long tongues at each other, as happy as babies. Lori smiled at them and waved. It wouldn't be so bad to be a Special Child, she thought. In some ways they're better off. They get to have fun all the time. They don't have any worries.

"Well?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ma'am? You don't see her?" When Mom pursed her lips at him and jutted out her jaw he said, "Let me check the Pop Sheet. There's a bench back by the office, if you'd like to sit down." He started away, then had another idea. "Why don't you join us for dinner? I'll ask the kitchen to make up a couple of extra plates."

"No, thank you."

"Mom. . .!" said Lori when he had gone.

"You hush," said Casey. "We don't need any favors from him."

Lori brooded, her stomach growling. "What did you mean when you said we only came to visit?"

"What?"

"I said we came to get Erin, and you said—"

Casey sighed. "I'm trying to decide what would be best for her. It's not easy."

"What's best for you, you mean."

Before her mother could say anything else, Lori left her and walked over to the playing field and sat in one of the swings.

This was the time of day she liked best, with the noisy hours past, the dust settled, the air clear. Above the trees the sky was the color of a deep ocean, and the evening star was showing on the horizon. Venus, she remembered from her book.

All the anger and resentment, built up inside her during the endless ride, left her like a long breath and blew away with the breeze that moved through the trees. For now she was empty and alone. She saw the outline of the playground equipment nearby, things she had left behind on the last day of school. She was surprised at how small they seemed to her, and wondered how such childish toys had ever supported her weight.

The breeze grew stronger, singing in the chains of the swing. She held them taut but they still vibrated in her fingers. They began to rattle. She could not stop them.

It was not the breeze, she realized. She was not alone. There was something loose in the ground, and it was running out all around her.

She looked at the long shadows growing by the slide and the merry-go-round and the jungle gym. Were they moving?

She saw her mother waiting in a pool of yellow light outside the chickenwire glass of the office. The rumbling was spreading, moving closer. Couldn't her mother hear it?

Then Lori saw the bobbing silhouette of a runner, arms and legs pumping spastically like the angled appendages of a monstrous spider. He passed the walkway and was lost again in the darkness.

Lori stood uncertainly, the links icy in her hands.

"Forty-two, forty-three, fifty-seven, ninety-nine. . ."

"Hello?" she said. "Is anybody there?"

"Got to keep count," he called above the thumping rhythm. "Did I break the record?"

"I—I don't know."

His silhouette passed closer as he circled the field, perilously near the tetherball pole. If his foot struck it he would lose his balance and go sprawling, probably straight into the monkey bars. It was too dark for running. Didn't he know that?

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm the 1500 meter. What are you?"

"I'm not anything," said Lori. "Why are you doing that?"

"Got to practice."

"You better be careful. It's getting pretty dark."

"Not me. I know the way perfect. Even at night. What's your name?"

"Lori. What's yours?"
The thumping slowed.

The thumping slowed. She heard a panting close by. Then a teenage boy was standing before her. He held his chin down as he gasped for breath, his chest heaving.

"I won," he said. "My best time."

"That's nice," she said. She saw his skinny bare arms glistening with perspiration, his oddly bent hands. "Um, for what?"

"For the Olympics," he said. He collapsed into the swing next to hers. "I went to the Fair. I didn't get to practice. Did you go to the Fair?"

"Me? I just got here."

"From the Fair?"

"From Los Angeles."

"Is that far away?"

"I guess so."

"No, it's not. I saw you before. You live in Green Cottage."

What was wrong with him? She changed the subject. "Why are you practicing for the 1500 meter? That's over already. It was today."

"Next Saturday," he said, swinging slowly. "I'm sixteen. Are you?"

She laughed. "No, silly."

As her eyes adjusted she made out the logo on his sweat-soaked shirt. It was the same red-white-and-blue design she saw everywhere, except that his had one word that was different. Like the counselors' shirts. At last she understood. SPECIAL Olympics. For the handicapped. She had seen a TV movie about it once. She smiled broadly.

"That's great," she told him, "really great. You'll win, I know. You're a good runner."

"I can run faster than anybody. I get the medal."

"I bet you do." She saw his hairy legs sticking out, his knobby knees, his worn tennis shoes with cartoon characters on the laces. She liked him very much. "I know who you saw," she said. "It was my sister. We sort of look alike. Where's Green Cottage?"

He pointed to the corner bungalow. "If you get lost, wait where you are. Miss Shelby will take you back to your room. Don't wander around after lights out, and no TV after ten o'clock."

Lori's mother heard the conversation and came over. "Who are you talking to out here?" she said.

"Um, a friend."

"What's your friend's name?"

"Did you see me?" he said. "I got the medal."

"Next Saturday," said Lori. "I wish I could be there."

"You will be," he said. "Next Saturday. Yesterday."

"Has the whole world gone crazy?" said Casey.

"Didn't they find Erin?" Lori asked her.

"They don't know anything. They said they were going to look for her, but I don't believe it. I don't believe anything anymore. They don't care if Erin's run off again."

"Is that what they said?"

"They don't have to. I should have known. It's something she learned from her father."

"I know where she is," said Lori. "Wait one minute."

"I'm tired of waiting," said Casey. "I'm not going to wait for anyone, ever again."

"No, really, Sit right here."

"Why should I? Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back, I promise. Talk to him, Mom. He's nice. Really." Lori left the swings and hurried across the field.

Most of the bungalows were empty now for dinner, but the lights had been left on. Through the windows she saw that some rooms were strung with crepe paper daisy chains and watercolor paintings, others with pictures of baby animals or rock stars. The ones with heavy metal posters, she knew, belonged to the boys.

Inside a dayroom, several girls her own age lounged on sofas and chairs, staring listlessly at a television set. They had already changed into their bathrobes and fuzzy slippers and were settling in for an evening of MTV. But of course Erin was not among them. This was not her building.

As she cut across to the corner bungalow, Lori looked back and saw her mother sitting resignedly in the swing next to the boy from the Special Olympics. From here she couldn't tell if they were talking. She hoped so.

Green Cottage was darker than the others. The older girls had covered their windows with rainbow stickers and tissue paper arranged in stained glass patterns. Lori managed to see into at least part of every room. With so many record album covers scattered over beds and the piles of underwear collecting in corners, they reminded her of Erin's room at home. But Erin was not in any of these, nor in the dayroom at the end.

She stood outside, her own face reflected in the glass. It was easy to imagine herself living here. She wanted her own room to have unicorns and stuffed animals and colored lampshades, too. After a while all the Green Cottage girls returned and were accounted for except Erin. When no one noticed Lori and invited her in she moved on, dejected.

How could she tell Mom?

On her way back to the field, she saw the young counselor who had tried to help Mom out of the car. He was coming this way. He had a jaunty way of walking that made her feel good. With each step the keys around his neck jingled like music.

"Hi," she said.

"What are you doing out of your room?"

"I don't have one."

"What's your color? You're in Green Cottage, aren't you?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean, I'm not really here. It's my sister. Don't you remember me? I came here with my mother to—"

"Oh, yeah. How're you doing? Did you find that sister of yours?"
"No. Did you?"

"Me? I thought Lissa was going to track her down. Well, she'll turn up. They always do. Tell your mom not to worry."

He started away.

"Hey, where's your mom now?"

"Over there, I think." She tipped her head to the darkness.

"What's she going to do about that tie-rod? I can give her the number of the garage in town, if she wants. Does she have the Auto Club?"

"Um, I'll ask."

It was too dark now to make out anything from the edge of the field. As she drew closer she heard the Olympic runner's flat-footed gait start up again. He couldn't stop practicing.

Had they made friends yet? Even if they had, Lori should come up with something to say to keep her mother from getting too depressed. When she was little Mom had done that for her, reading her stories so that she would not be afraid. And now Lori would do the same for her. She hoped it would help.

She tried to think of something interesting from *The Book of Uncommon Knowledge*. The divorce rate, for example. It was fifty-one point seven percent now. Did Mom know that? She probably did. How about the one that said your hair and skin keep on growing after you die? If that was true, she thought, how could you ever know whether anyone was dead or alive? How long would it take to be sure?

"Mom?"

She let the footsteps pass once before she left the path, moving cautiously until the swings were lined up against the office on the other side. They were empty, but one set of chains was moving. Had Mom been sitting in that one?

At that moment the sound of running feet, magnified into a heartbeat between the buildings, was interrupted suddenly by a dull thud, followed by the ringing slap of flesh against steel. Lori had a mental picture of a wild horse tripped and brought to its knees, the way they did it in cowboy movies. Then there was a kicking and thrashing and a terrible high-pitched wail.

"Mom?"

Lori rushed in, her own heart drumming in her ears.

Somebody in the office heard, too, because the outside lights went on. And she saw.

The runner lay crumpled on the ground near the monkey bars, clutching one leg. A piece of bone stuck out below the kneecap. His face was twisted in pain and his mouth was open. Lori's mother was bending over him.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

Casey looked up. Her eyes were wild. She recognized Lori and stopped her fists. She lowered her hands and sat back, blinking at them as if they were someone else's, and pressed them to her face. When she took them down her expression was the same flat mask as always.

"It's all right now," she said. Her face quivered and changed once more, then to the mask, then back again. She could no longer control it.

Lori went to the boy. "What happened? Are you hurt bad?"

"Bad. . .!" he blubbered, his tears falling like dew on the grass. "T-t-tripped . . ."

Lori turned on her mother. "What did you do?"

"I asked him to help me find Erin," Casey said. "And he started to run. That's all any of them know how to do. They can't wait to get away. But that's all over. Come with me now, baby."

"No, Mom, you're wrong! I'm not your baby anymore." Lori began to cry. It was the first time since Dad left. "Don't you understand?" she sobbed. "We're not going anywhere!"

Some of the counselors came out and tended the boy, as Lori's mother told them a story about what had happened. They nodded solemnly. No one argued with her. How could they? It was her word against the boy's. But Mom told the story again just to be sure. As she walked away with them, her feet made a funny zigzag pattern on the ground, as if she did not know where she was going.

Lori waited in the dark, on the grass, crying and crying. Now that she had started she was afraid she would never stop. And that she would never know.

# Take the "A" Train

## Wayne Allen Sallee

Wayne Allen Sallee created some controversy in The Year's Best Horror Stories: XIV last year with his story, "Rapid Transit." "Take the 'A' Train" is a follow-up to that story—an exploration of some alternative interpretations of "Rapid Transit" which Sallee says he had not considered at the time he wrote the story.

Born September 19, 1959 in Chicago, Wayne Allen Sallee has taken the small press field by storm and force. By the first day in 1987 he had had 320 poems accepted for publication and had sold twenty-four horror stories. His work has appeared in Grue, New Blood, Twisted, Sycophant, Gas, 1130 Club, Back Brain Recluse, Dreams & Nightmares, Portents, Döppelgänger, and dozens more. As I've earlier commented, the small press field is intense. Sallee resides in Chicago, where he is working on his second novel, The Holy Terror, while his first, Paingrin, stalks a publisher.

CASSADY SPENT October in his dingy, three-room hovel, submerged in his own guilt, self-exiled from the city. He ventured out rarely, and then only for food. His phone was disconnected on the twentieth, three days after the girl's murder. ComEd hadn't taken care of the lights yet, so he was able to spend the days watching television, safe from the prying eyes of the neighborhood. He watched situation comedies from the 1960s, mostly shows with father figures.

The scar on his hand was healing nicely. And on Halloween, Cassady stayed in the corner tavern for three beers and nobody had asked him any questions. That made him feel better, feel as if he could tackle the world again.

When he went home from the bar, Cassady spent long, quiet moments contemplating the Terri Welles centerfold on his bedroom wall. He decided he would talk to Sarah about the murder the next afternoon.

The first of November came in with a freezing downpour, but the rain did not deter Cassady from waiting the half-hour for the train to Sarah's

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flat on the north side. The four-car El was delayed by what the conductor said was a police and gang-related incident, and when it finally did arrive, icicles were forming in Cassady's beard. He cursed an elderly woman for not boarding the train faster. She had begun to say something in return, but stopped when she saw the hatred in his eyes.

He stood commando style against the sliding, graffiti-washed doors. Let someone try and make him move out of the way! He scanned the faces of the others in his car carefully, but did not see the killer's face or anybody else's that was recognizable. This was a city of strangers. He would leave soon, yes oh yes. No one knew him anymore. He would go to Boston or . . . or New York City. It was a grim resolution.

The train wormed underground, avoiding the rich bankers and pretty secretaries who lived and/or worked on Rush Street and the Gold Coast. Cassady knew in his mind that it was not always this way; the fatcats and moneymakers had forced the city government to change the tracks to fit their needs. But, Cassady didn't think the train was an eyesore. The pretty stewardesses and waitresses who lived on Sandburg Terrace could fuck themselves. He was glad that the Tylenol Killer had been able to kill at least one of them. Whoever he had been, if Cassady had known him, he would have told the killer to put cyanide in *all* the bottles in the Walgreen's on Rush Street. Then they all would have died. Forty minutes later, Cassady stepped off the train at Addison. He was humming Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl."

Picking up a copy of the Tribune's Green Streak at a corner kiosk on Waveland that smelled like crap, Cassady read that a suspect had been questioned as the El Murderer. Cassady was shocked to find out that Quita McLean's knife-killing was the third in the last four weeks. Why hadn't he read about the others? Were the papers covering this up like they did everything else? Were there people out there who maybe had witnessed one of the other murders like he had? Maybe seen the killer's face? Would they be sympathetic toward him or hate him?

Cassady pressed his fists to his forehead, dropping the paper. Two Hispanics in leather blazers stared at him from across the street.

Witnesses... the thought made him shiver. He was getting sick again, just like Martin Balsam in "The Taking of Pelham One, Two, Three." This city was killing him. Sarah would help ease his suffering, though, like she always had.

Wait. Someone was watching him from behind.

Turning quickly, Cassady saw no one. Perhaps the watcher was some kind of acrobat and was now hiding behind the newspaper stand? Turning back, he saw the blond man staring, white hairs sticking out of

his beard like weeds. Red veins quavered in his eyes. Cassady suddenly realized that he was staring into mirrored glass.

He walked toward Broadway in the quickening darkness, leaves piled like ashes all around him. Cassady had known Sarah since his freshman year at the University of Illinois on Polk Street. 1980. Geez, six years that

seemed like vesterday. He still couldn't find a decent job.

Sarah had tawny hair and almond brown doe eyes. Cassady felt himself getting an erection. Once, when he had awakened after dozing on the bus and dreaming of Sigourney Weaver, Cassady was embarrassed to discover that he was the proud owner of a raging hard-on and at least three bus passengers were aware of it. They had tittered amongst themselves, thinking everything was funny as usual. If only more people could be concerned with what was happening in the real world. After the bus incident, Cassady learned to sleep with a copy of the Trib over his lap, even if he was only daydreaming.

Sarah had taken up nursing after graduation. He had dropped out in his junior year at the U of I. She still loved him, though. The suspected killer's name was David Spellman, age 27, unemployed. Chicago's Finest found him in an alleyway behind a Winchell's Donut House. He was in the process of raping a fifteen-year-old girl. He had a broken Coke bottle in one hand, and still had not actually confessed to anything. Cassady reeled off the stats from the newspaper article as if he had been reading the back of a Topps baseball card. He did not realize he was talking out

He knew them all, though. Manson. Speck. Son of Sam. And Gacy, just five Christmases ago. What was that joke . . . Gacy's favorite country and western song: I'm walking the floor over youuu . . . His voice trailed in mock falsetto, echoing madly in the shadowed corners of New Town. Some people thought the gays deserted it, deserved getting picked up by Gacy and shown the old handcuff trick. Cassady didn't think so, though. Gavs were different, but that was no reason to kill them.

The paper also had a short piece about the man who had found Quita McLean's body. It was on page three of the Chicagoland section, next to an ad for Field Days.

Sarah Dunleavy lived in a second-floor walkup at 1123 Wolfram. Wrigley Field was a short distance away, and as he trudged toward Sarah's block, Cassady imagined opening day of the '86 season. Maybe this would be the year the Cubs would take it. He remembered all the times his mother had taken him to the weekend games with the Cardinals and the Mets. The smell of hot dogs and pizza, watching couples hold hands, yelling when Banks or Santo hit one out on Sheffield. Songs on the radio . . .

(Do you remember when, we used to sing, shala la la) Well, shala la la, here he was. He scratched nervously at his right hand before ringing the bell.

(Whatever happened, to Tuesday and So Slow?) He wondered whatever had happened to Van Morrison, the Dave Clark Five, Paul Revere & The Raiders.

"Denny!" Sarah said buoyantly in the open doorway. She was wearing Levi's and a loose-fitting burnt-orange sweater. The sleeves were pushed up around her elbows. When they kissed, Cassady felt that she still wasn't wearing a bra. "Bet you're hungry after that long rain ride, huh?"

"Yea." Cassady tried not to sound distracted. "You bet."

He sat at the kitchen table while Sarah busied herself with the dinner. She turned now and then to ask a question, her hair falling across her face. He was happy that she was not wearing makeup or nail polish. That was for the sluts who worked downtown.

He made small talk about the weather and his job interviews and then stared at the flowered wallpaper until Sarah walked to his seat with the prepared meal.

(Countin' flowers on the wall, that don't bother me at all)

They walked together into the living room and sat near the television. Sarah placed a steaming plate of roast beef and mashed potatoes on the tray next to him. She poured a Pepsi into his glass. He watched it fizz, as if something mystical.

"Hey, thanks," Cassady said, smoothing his shirt.

Sarah sat back on the sofa and watched him eat. Using the remote control, she turned on the television. He was grateful when Sarah switched from the news to a rerun of Barney Miller.

Cassady slowly cut into the meat. It was rare, his favorite. The knife scraped against the ceramic plate, and the juice sprayed finely onto the sleeve;

(The juice erupted from the woman's breast and soaked his sweater) he watched it spread into the cotton blend like a hideous sunset, pushing his plate away in disgust;

(Because she was dead and his hand o god his hand held the bloody knife)

and Sarah looked away from one of Dietrich's witticisms to Inspector Luger at the sudden jangling of the plate.

"This steak is too damn rare," Cassady spat, needing something to say.

"Denny," Sarah exclaimed, wiping her hands down the sides of her jeans. "You always order it that way everywhere you go. You know how the waitresses all think you're some kind of werewolf!"

"The waitresses don't know shit!" Cassady hissed.

"Denny, what the *hell* is the matter with you," Sarah said, concerned lines finding their proper place on her face.

Cassady's hands played twister with his hair. His eyes were squeezed

shut. Minutes passed thickly.

Finally, with Cassady staring at the powder-blue carpet, and Sarah looking at him, studying him, the entire time, he spoke. He explained that he was having a rough time finding a job since his unemployment ran out, and that his shoulder was sore again because of the damp weather. Sarah understood him well. And oh how she loved him. Soon, they were laughing about the new Woody Allen film, and about snoopy old Mrs. Spinoza next door. They talked about dinner on the lakefront that summer, Christmas shopping, and the taverns on Division Street. Then Cassady's face clouded over as fast as a schizoid's, as if he had just remembered why he had come.

"You know, Sarah," he said softly. She stopped smiling. "Well, I sort of knew this girl once. She worked down the mall from me when I was at the Jeans place in the mall. A few of the girls at the store used to go to lunch with her."

Cassady was speaking in a detached way, strangely formal, as one might speak to an old friend at a wake. Sarah studied his face more closely, looking for some clue as to his behavior. There was none.

"It's been almost two years since the night she didn't come home," he continued. "She was a lot like me, you know. She really loved the city. Not being afraid to go out at night like just about everybody else."

"I'm not afraid," Sarah interrupted softly.

"I know." Cassady didn't hear what she said. "I guess that's why I still think about her,

(sometimes I'm overcome thinking about it, making love in the green grass)

even though I only met her once or twice. She reminded me so much of myself. I don't know...it's hard, Sarah. It's hard to explain why I love it here so much. Yea, I know. You can't walk around smiling without people thinking you're gay or retarded or something.

"But, let me tell you something, Sarah

(behind the stadium with you)

on a day when everybody and everything spits in my face, I love it here that much more

(my brown-eyed girl)

"It was December. This one girl I knew, Karen—she was manager of my store at the time—she told me how her and Vicki used to sit in front of Foxmoor's, and that's what they had done that last day, eating lunch on the floor because it was so crowded with Christmas shoppers, and they were throwing fries at each other, making faces at the shoppers. And that night, Vicki went to a bar and never came home.

"This wasn't in a bar in a rough neighborhood or something," Cassady said, shaking his head. "It was in Palos Heights, for chrissakes. Four blocks from her home."

More silence. A car honked outside. The door upstairs slammed distantly.

"They found her in January. This farmer up near the Wisconsin border let his dog out one morning, and . . . this is how the paper put it: 'After several minutes of digging in the snow, the dog ran proudly back to its master, the head of the missing girl jauntily dangling from his mouth.' Jauntily dangling. Jesus, can you believe that? The coroner put the time of death at about a week before that. There were pieces of her all over the field."

His hands were still pressed tightly against his skull. Cassady made claws out of his fingers and dug them into the creases around his forehead, as if trying to re-open a line of sutures that held back a slow trickle of mistakenly discarded memories. He thought of the blood dripping down Quita McLean's thigh, black in the glow of the streetlamps. Just like the others. He did not mention that he had asked Vicki out to dinner, and that she had refused, placing him in the class of all the other macho animals. Sarah didn't need to know that.

Sarah had begun to speak when Cassady lifted his head. The blood vessels stood out in his cheeks from where his palms had pushed against the skin. Several thin red scratches ran across his forehead. My God, Denny used to have laugh lines, Sarah thought.

The clock behind Cassady read ten o'clock. Over two hours had passed. A rerun of "M\*A\*S\*H" was on the television.

"No," Cassady said with a tone of finality, knowing what Sarah was going to ask. Oh he knew her only too well. Women were all alike, really. "They thought it was her boyfriend, but they couldn't be sure."

He stopped talking then. He was thinking about other, more private things. Sarah reached across the distance between them and took his hand, wiping the blood that was on his nails, soothing him just like she did in that dream thousands of years before. Yes, she knew him well. Too well.

Cassady knew this, knew that it was only a matter of time before the cops came and asked her questions. He really had only one choice.

Sarah slowly realized the change that was occurring in Cassady. He looked too calm. Too serene. Instead of wondering why he had brought up all these memories, tragic as they were, she felt chilled.

Denny's eyes were different, she thought.

"Denny, I—"

"Sarah, wait. Do you remember a few years ago, it was around the time of the Humboldt Park riots, that girl who was raped near the Belmont El?

"Remember that guy, he was a clerk in a record store, and he tried to

help, and the guy stabbed him to death?..."

"Denny, you can't blame yourself for what happened to that girl at work." Sarah said. "You weren't even with her the night it happened, you couldn't possibly have saved her."

She shivered in the semi-darkness of the room.

"You're right about the city, though. You can only pray it doesn't happen to you.

"Now, c'mere."

She pulled him toward her, burying his face into her blonde hair.

"You know," Cassady spoke into Sarah's breasts. "I'm not like the others . . . like that old bag Spinoza next door.

"I'm not afraid of the streets."

"Nobody said you were, Denny," Sarah said, slowing rocking him back and forth in her arms. "C'mon. I'll make you a drink."

She stood up, ruffling Cassady's hair as if he were a child's plaything, and walked across the room to the small bar that stood against the wall. There were only two bottles on the shelf: a full bottle of Seagram's and a half-empty fifth of DuBouchett's Blackberry Brandy, for when Sarah's father came by to see how his little girl was doing on her own.

"I'm . . . not sure why you told me these things, Denny," Sarah

repeated. "But, don't blame yourself. Believe me."

"You're right." Cassady's voice was like a metronome. "Life's too short."

He covered his eyes with his hands again. Without stopping, he told Sarah about the October night on the El platform, about being a spectator to death. In his head he was singing

(making love in a rock bed)

Sarah spilled much of the bottle's contents on the counter.

(beneath the subway tracks with you)

Cassady slowly took his hands from his face. Without stopping, he let

the knife drop into Sarah Dunleavy's back. Much of her blood spilled onto the counter.

(my brown-eyed girl)

The next several hours were a nightmarish blur. Conspiracy blended with paranoia, enveloping Cassady the moment he left Sarah's apartment. His face was no longer familiar; he was wearing the same type of mask that all the other faces were wearing. Every day of their stinking lives. The cops wouldn't even question his motive; they would nod their heads in agreement and maybe even buy him a beer after he told them the reason he killed the love of his life SarahSarahSarahhhhh

He grabbed a too-inquisitive squirrel and squeezed its steaming guts onto the dying grass as if the rodent was toothpaste. Squirrel-honey, your gums are bleeding because of gingivitus, you dumbshit. Better use Colgate. Ha! He named the squirrel Binky. R.I.P., Binky old buddy. Hasti Spumanti.

It was a Bad Day at Black Rock, all right. First Sarah and her incessant whining over his looks and that stupid laugh that sounded like a freaking air hose! And the rain was making the deadspace in his right bicep throb as if the muscle was still there. Fucking doctors, eight years ago said it'd be all right. Yea, all the interns at the Osteopathic Hospital were aware of his case, nodding their heads in agreement, saying the muscle would be back in the next six months. Liars! Didn't they realize muscles are what girls wanted? They were too busy making their six-figure incomes anyway...

Cassady bought a pint of Seagram's, downed it while crossing a public park, and threw the empty bottle with all his might. He clapped in glee when the bottle smashed against the wall of a recreation center, shattering the gang graffiti and lovers' initials.

He ran screaming down a deserted midnight street. No one looked out their windows, and, knowing this, Cassady smiled broadly and winked at the clouds above.

He shred secrets with the drainage ditches.

Somehow finding his way uptown to Sheridan, Cassady raced madly for the El tracks intersecting the street at Loyola. He fell down, chipping a front tooth. Swinging a ragged fist, he mouthed bloody epithets at several singing winos behind the ruins of the Grenada theater.

He had to get to the train. Pull a train. The train of thought. He had lost his train of thought. Hey, where did we go, days when the rain came? All along the waterfall with you, my brown-eyed girl. On Slate Street that grate street I saw a man he dry humped his wife a Chicano made moan

sound Ha! I saw a man he danced with a knife in Chicago oh please come to Boston in the springtime . . . the train! It was coming he could make it

(underneath the subway tracks with you)

(my brown-eyed girl)

the train. A giant, throbbing penis that screwed Cassady every time he took its sterile ride for a job interview. Or for a pick up.

The turnstile of the Loyola station wavered in front of him, a gateway to truth, an upright skeleton of a dead centipede. Glazed with ice, it blazed like neon blue in Cassady's brain.

He found the needed energy to run toward it, making the distance easily in seven long strides. But the bars moved clockwise, providing an exit for the commuters inside. It was not intended to be an entrance. The bars did not budge and Cassady was beyond hearing his nose crack. His lips curled in a snarl and his teeth touched the frozen metal.

He stepped back, lunging forward three more times, each time harder than the previous, stopping only when a triangular swatch of his cheek was ripped from his face. A bone shard, fingernail-thin and red in the night, peeked through Cassady's right eyelid like a sentry. Scouting a new way to get into the fortress.

He left the turnstile, then. Stumbling toward the closed glass doors. Flecks of his face trailed behind.

The door was locked. He did not hesitate, and by crashing through it, gouged his already blinded eye. When he hit the ground, something broke deep inside him, making a pulpy sound, perhaps that of crushing grapes for wine.

His legs made mock parodies of each other as he fell forward along the concrete floor. Muttering incoherent thankyous that it was too late for a teller to be on duty, Cassady crawled up the iced stairs, ten, twenty, thirty leading upward into a mist. Darkness clutched at his one remaining eyelid.

When he heard the quiet rumble of the approaching train, not realizing that the Loyola terminal was closed for repairs, he finally relaxed.

He cried as the train went by, a thunderous blur of winos and late-night partyers, none so much as noticing his outstretched, supplicating arms.

He cried louder, in great sobs spewed from his throat like vomit. Then he saw the man, so much like him, dragging his body away from Cassady as if Cassady himself was some kind of psycho pariah. Or was that messiah?

The similar man undid the buttons on his shirt in painful slowness. Would anybody case if Cassady did kill himself, like he knew the other 598

man was going to do? He was sure his parents didn't even know he was living in Chicago. The last time he had written them, years before, he had told them he was working for the government. Would his face be in the paper? Pull a train, pull the cord tighter tighter honey honey sugar sugar yummy yummy. My brown-eyed girl.

Tying the knot was easier than he had expected, even with the skin

peeling off his fingers in the pre-dawn cold.

The other man, now nothing more than a shadow, climbed on top of the salt box next to the stairwell. He waited for Cassady to decide. So, it was going to be a game of chicken! Cassady would show them all!

The other man, now just a mist, painstakingly tied one shirt sleeve

around his tired neck.

And on a blustery night in early November, long after the Night Owl train was lost in the distance of the skyline, Dennis Cassady watched with numb fascination as a crazy man hung himself with the remains of his blood splattered shirt. He was afraid to make a move.

Of course, there were no living witnesses.

# The Foggy, Foggy Dew

#### Joel Lane

Joel Lane is one of the youngest writers to appear in The Year's Best Horror Stories, and it's nice to see that there's no danger the breed is dying out. Lane was born in Exeter in 1963, grew up in Birmingham, and is presently at Cambridge, where he obtained a B.A. in History and Philosophy of Science and has now started research in the same subject. He has published poetry in Argo, Oxford Poetry, and elsewhere, and his stories have appeared in Dark Horizons and Dark Dreams. He has also written a critical essay on Ramsey Campbell for Foundation.

"The Foggy, Foggy Dew" was published as a small press booklet (accompanied by a short poem) and suggests that Joel Lane will shortly be as popular with the Birmingham tourist industry as Ramsey Campbell

must be with Liverpool's—assuming such exists.

THE GRAY VAN which stopped in front of the office carried no legend to correspond to the words O'BRIEN INDUSTRIAL SERVICES printed in gray on the locked office door. As the eight people who had been waiting on the pavement gathered by the van, a short man in a cheap blue suit emerged from its front. He ticked their names on a list. "Right, can you get in the back?" They climbed awkwardly onto the wooden benches that flanked the body of the van, on opposite sides of a heap of canvas-covered boxes. The benches were dusty; someone coughed. The drizzle made a subdued insect-sound on the low roof. The van shuddered into activity; its interior was paler than the exterior, a discolored white, and enough light connected the windscreen with the blurred pane in the back door for the passengers to see one another. Outside, the rain filled in the remaining pale spaces on the pavement.

The young man seated opposite Daniel shrugged his raincoat up above his head and pulled it forward, reversing the sleeves, until he was free of its shadow. The gloom diminished his face, sharpening its familiarity. But even when, a few minutes later, the other offered Daniel a cigarette and he saw the long, tapering fingers, he could not convince himself of

the recognition. Too much of the past was at stake for him not to hesitate. But as the journey continued, Daniel suspected that the other was watching him in a similar manner. Ahead, the windscreen blinked repeatedly at the gauze of rain.

The van stopped in a car park somewhere to the north of Birmingham. It released them halfway up a slope; uphill a line of factory buildings were being repaired or demolished, and in the creases of the valley a slick road twisted like a ribbon of metal. There were no houses in sight; a new industrial estate was taking shape on the ground of an older one. Large open patches displayed only flattened mounds of brick and steel, flecked with clumps of purple-flowering weed; only rain and the eye lent them perpendicular structures. Where the road dissolved in mist, three black chimneys were stubbed out against the sky. One was broken in half, presenting a scalpel's profile. Inside the factory it was dry, which made the air seem colder. A corridor opened onto rooms housing nothing but unfinished monsters of scaffolding. Radios competed with machinery. The vast concrete-floored warehouse in which the eight workers found themselves was contrastingly still and quiet. Tiers of metal shelves, beginning some eight feet off the ground, formed dust-skinned ranks that were confusingly repetitive of the half-light. Daniel remembered how the public library had seemed to him as a child; being empty made these shelves even harder to distinguish.

Throughout the morning they swept the dust on the floor into ridges like Braille, then into mounds. It was so light and dry that the brooms raised little gray clouds whose outlines settled on the concrete. Apart from an occasional cough or sneeze, the only sound was the insectile rustle of the brooms. When they swept fine wet sand back over the same ground, the concrete began to reflect a thin light. The mounds were shoveled into wheelbarrows. The faint antiseptic smell of the cleaning sand drifted ambiguously over the original metallic odor. Someone in a white overall pushed a trolley along the dim aisle.

Daniel held a huge plastic mug of oversweetened tea between his grimy hands. He scrutinized the vague figure seated beside him by the wall. Had he seen it hunched over a desk? The figure shook with a violent sneeze; spilled tea played a bar on the floor. The man turned around. "Have you got a light?" he asked, then stared. "Hello, Danny."

"Peter—I thought I recognized you." Suddenly he could recall clearly the image that had suggested itself: the boy of fourteen, face calm, eyes unreachable as he leaned over the piano keys. Six years ago Peter's father had died, and Peter and his mother had moved away to another district; they had lost touch after that. "What a coincidence. How are you?"

Peter's reply disintegrated into a violent fit of sneezing. He put his hand to his face; it came away discolored with blood. "Oh, Jesus." He fumbled into his pockets. "Have you got a handkerchief? Thanks." He leaned back, pressing Daniel's handkerchief into his face. "Sorry about this... just this... dust," he said nasally.

That afternoon Daniel and Peter used a mobile scaffolding frame to clean the lower tier of shelves in each row, taking it in turns to push the frame along. From time to time they whipped the bars with their dusters, creating sudden negative-image flowers in the air. As each gray keyboard of metal followed the last, Daniel felt more distant from his own mechanical actions. He could not imagine stopping, though his hands flinched from contact with the uncomfortable metal surfaces. Hours later the two climbed down, wearing makeup of dust-bound sweat. They washed in a mobile toilet on the building site; as Daniel turned to the door, Peter was still scrubbing at his hands and staring angrily into a freckled mirror. "Need hot water, for God's sake," he muttered. When he returned to the warehouse several minutes later, his face and hands were marked with red scratches. The anonymous van, which returned to the car park at four o'clock, seemed exactly the same color as the shelves. Vacillating between sleep and waking, Daniel hung the pale faces opposite him in a series of steel frames. Outside, nightfall was beginning to paint in the gaps between buildings.

"I think we might do it this time. There'd be enough dust in the atmosphere to shut out the sunlight for weeks; the world would just freeze over." The Anvil's gloomy interior suddenly framed a snapshot of trees shattering like icicles onto a dead soil, weighted down by tides of mist. "Be useless to stay underground. There won't be a blade of grass left on the surface. Won't even be air to breathe." Daniel stared at the taut face across the table. His glass was chilly in his hands, dulled over with vapor. He shut his eyes, and the picture intensified: snow crusted like mold over an endless plain, littered with bodies that glowed faintly in the dark. Abstract faces crumbled; they consisted of gray ashes, like papier-mâché masks. The men sitting by the wall had similar faces, patient and knowing. They looked up from their pints of Guinness as Peter continued: "They say people fear the unknown, but if something is feared it becomes unknown. It's like a shadow, it destroys the ability to see what causes it. Eventually it pervades and disconnects everything. By the time the end comes you can't tell it apart from the past. Imagine. though, casting a horoscope and finding that absolutely nothing is going to happen."

Daniel felt a gap widening between the words and their meaning. Was he drunk? Perhaps he could not hear all of what Peter was saying. The song on the jukebox seemed to go on forever without changing, dropping phrases like litter onto a neutral background: *Tell me how does it feel, when your heart grows cold?* "What about survival?" he tried. "You used to say man would survive if he wanted to."

"Well, perhaps. I don't know what survives. Is it humanity that wants to survive, or is it just flesh that doesn't want to turn into dirt?" He finished his pint. "Christ, look at the time. My mother'll be worried."

Daniel stood up; confusion filled his head like catarrh. Only outside, where it was already dark, could he see clearly. The clocks had been set back a few days ago. "Come along, she'll be glad to see you." The Anvil's door divided the jukebox and a barrage of noise. "They're widening the road," Peter explained. Wires that drooped plastic flags guided them through a maze of trenches and pits. A series of terraced houses were in the process of being demolished; the glimpses of pale wallpaper, strips of green vinyl over splintered boards, a red metal staircase, were inexplicably embarrassing. Another house supported a growth of scaffolding. some of whose squares were filled in by tarpaulins. The next street was a row of little shops, mostly boarded up. The boards were patched with several layers of posters, some advertising events months past. Corrugated iron distorted a gigantic face. In one of the side-streets, so narrow that cars could not pass by one another, two old women in housecoats stood talking, bent nearly horizontal. They did not move as the two men passed between them. In a gap between the houses a narrow canal gleamed through spiked railings. At the next house Peter stepped over a low wall, crossed a paved front yard and knocked loudly at the door; then he unlocked it and led Daniel inside. A wardrobe occupied the space between the inner door and the naked stairs, to the right of which a narrow hallway was painted orange by the lampshade. A chilly Picasso family-man, woman, and child-stared toward the floor. From the front room there came a repeated sound of high-pitched clicking. "Hello," Peter called. The sound halted.

Mrs. Telford had aged considerably since Daniel had last met her. Loss of weight had sharpened the birdlike quality of her angular face, while her hair was thinner and paler as though it had died. Between her chair and the door, occupying half of the small room, was a black wooden handloom. Her hands, which, like her son's, were long-fingered and slender, perched on the shuttles. Squares of completed cloth, their pattern lost in the dimness, hung from several of the wires. After the brief interruption, her hands slipped back into the involuntary routine of

movement. The clicking of the shuttles synchronized with her words: "So you're Danny Carr, I remember you." As they talked, Peter shifted uneasily at the door. "Peter told me about meeting you at this job, a strange coincidence, don't you agree?" She sniffed. "Have you two been drinking?"

"Only a little," said Peter. He moved clumsily around the room; the contrast with his mother's appearance made him seem heavier than before. Daniel watched the alternating shuttles, nearly hypnotized.

"You know how it is," Mrs. Telford said to Daniel, "when they grow up you've got no authority any more. He doesn't listen, doesn't even hear me. And when he's been so ill—"Her eyes focused on a point somewhere in front of Daniel's face; he remembered that she was shortsighted.

"Just some kind of allergy," Peter muttered to no one in particular. The abstraction that had been noticeable in the pub was taking possession of him. He drew away from his phantom image in the window and occupied himself with coughing quietly. "Must have been the dust in the factory. It was only the first day."

"Well, why not spend all of your money on poisoning yourself?" Her hands increased in pace; she glanced at Daniel as if to say can't you see the joke? The patches of finished cloth shifted in position, like draughts on a board. "Can you stay for dinner?"

"No, thank you. I've got to get home soon." He was glad that this was true: eating in strange company made him feel stupidly clumsy. But Peter had behaved as though he wanted to discuss something. He felt guilty about leaving now, while his friend was off balance.

"Why don't you show Danny your music room?" Mrs. Telford said. Peter stepped forward, his face still in shadow. He reached out a hand as though to touch her bent shoulder, to make a link, but drew it back. "You'll excuse me for not coming with you," she continued to Daniel, "I don't walk around much these days. My arthritis is getting worse." For the first time, he noticed a pair of dull aluminum crutches leaning against the far wall, next to Peter.

The music room was upstairs, between the two bedrooms. It had clearly once been a child's bedroom, perhaps Peter's; the wallpaper, tacky with mingled dust and moisture, was the same sickly pink as the cotton curtains. Two gray metal bookcases stood to left and right, one erratically packed with books, the other bearing heaps of music scripts, some in box files, most in loose bundles. "Most of the music was my father's," Peter said. In the middle of the room stood the large piano that Daniel remembered from the front room of the Telford's former house. Behind it, a dull brass Christ was dying on the wall, small as a pinned insect.

"You still play the piano?" he said. Memories jabbed him: Peter in music lessons at school, in the junior-school assembly hall, at home in the evening. The wooden mouth jerked open to reveal the pattern which he had been reminded of several times lately, though he couldn't recall what by. Peter sat down on the stool and bent his head low over the keyboard, as though trying to read it. From downstairs Daniel could hear the insistent click of the loom; and from along the street, he heard the crunch and scrape of demolition.

Peter had been playing for what must have been half an hour when the lights went out; Daniel had listened in a kind of confused trance that was more submission than attention. The player seemed to draw life out of the keys into his fingers, while his body and head remained fixed as a fetal statue. One of the keys struck dully—the wire was slack—and he drew in breath abruptly whenever he touched it, or when he played an occasional wrong note. Every few minutes he either switched to another tune or waited for Daniel to suggest one. When the house suddenly went dark, he carried on playing; perhaps his eyes were closed. Daniel remembered that the local papers had carried warnings about the likely effect of coal shortages on Midland power stations. He wondered whether there were any candles in the house. In the dark the piano, a cold and painful voice, limped on regardless; so, he realized suddenly, did the even click of the handloom downstairs. There was a quality both reassuring and slightly threatening in these sounds that kept him, silent, in his chair and listening. Gradually his friend's profile defined itself out of the gray.

He could see the piano and its hunched player with detailed clarity, though the rest of the room was blurred; and no light came from the window. He could even distinguish the black from the white keys, and follow Peter's fingers on them. The tune was familiar, though he couldn't put a name to it. There must be a draught from somewhere, turning the room cold; the walls were invisible, and he could imagine himself to be in a vast open tunnel. The figure in front of him was smaller and more sharply featured than before. There was less of a curve to the mouth, and the eyes were wider open. The thought let a few words loose from the tune: and the every, every time that I look into his eyes, he reminds me of the fair young maid . . . But he didn't want to look into the eyes, for this was the face that Peter had worn perhaps seven years ago. He hoped that the illusion would dissolve before this image could turn toward him a face of terrible perfection. If only Peter would cough, falter or play a false note, it would set him free. But the notes plucked at him, drawing his eyes to the piano, where he could now see the strings and the hammers

forming the skeleton of a chessboard, one square vibrating at a time. Dust surged back and forth on the squares, almost making figures—the draught was coming from the piano, he realized. That was why its teeth were chattering. He suspected that if he looked downward, he would be able to see the loom, the hands riding the shuttles, even the pattern on the finished squares. He did not look downward, but tensed in his chair, captured by vertigo.

A mass of figures hovered, inside or beyond the piano. They were houses in a street plan. As Peter used the loudness pedal in two harsh chords, the houses disintegrated. Some burned like newspaper, some were simply flattened. Others remained in place as charred shells, standing without roofs or windows. They could all have been card houses in the wind. Human figures struggled in them like insects being tortured by children, until they had no limbs left to struggle with. Even when the jagged ruins were softened by drifting gray snow, a few people wandered over the mounds, perhaps wondering where their homes were. One made a cross of sticks and left it stuck at an angle in the snow—was it snow or ashes? Whatever it was, it blew into people's faces and shriveled them. Kings and knights turned to pawns and were captured. The curled bodies glowed faintly, like their own ghosts, until the gray covered them entirely. The piano's cold notes fell into the vacuum, while the loom continued to mark the time, a perpetual metronome. Daniel squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his hands over his ears. He would not let this instrument draw the life out of him on its wires—but he could feel the response growing in him like unexpelled breath; tears formed behind his eyelids. The despairing reached out for him with arms that stretched harder even as the flesh dripped from them. Their faces were lost, but photographs of his family were stuck over the skulls. Before he could find his own among the faces, Daniel stood up and fumbled for the wall. Almost blind, he made his way by touch to the door. He searched for words. "Good-bye," said Peter, setting him free.

"Good-bye." The movements that took him downstairs and outside felt arbitrary. The streets were lightly smeared with mist; he felt warmer in the open air. There was a space in his thoughts where the edges itched like healing tissue; what continually seemed worst to him was how the feeling from within himself had suddenly closed off. It had been too easy to walk away, there should have been more sense of decision. On the horizon, street lamps were reduced to slanted eyes. The road-menders had packed up for the night; their trenches by the pavement appeared bottomless. It was some time before he happened to find the bus stop. Every vehicle that passed was transformed into anonymous gray. As

Daniel finally stepped onto the bus it occurred to him that he had forgotten to say good-bye to Mrs. Telford. He would apologize when he saw Peter at work on Monday.

There was no work until the following Thursday, however, and the group that Daniel found himself in was mostly different from that of the first week. Peter was not among them. "I've no idea," the foreman said when Daniel asked, "probably he found another job." Another van almost indistinguishable from the first ferried them to a series of small factories where they packed boxes with sawdust, polished machinery until it shone like bone. Daniel eventually became fascinated by the pattern that the company's activity was forming in the city. He was reminded of a novel that he had once read which suggested a hidden meaning in the architecture of San Francisco; the idea had so many applications that at times only a growing insecurity could pull him out of speculation. In a similar way, he began to find that he could listen to the radio for hours while he tried to link the underlying threads in the music. He played his records until he could hold every note and space in his mind, where he replayed them at different speeds. The language of musical notation was surely not adequate. It might conceal another language, he realized, that contained messages. Perhaps a way in which ghosts could communicate. A dead language. Daniel knew that these patterns were illusory, but it didn't matter. At least they responded to minds, which no object could. Weeks went past while he placed abstractions between himself and Peter; and nothing changed, except that the day shrank like a window between the curtains of night, and the patterns of leaves on the sky and the pavement became simpler.

One night he dreamed an idea and lay awake, thinking it out, while the moon appeared and vanished. If he cast a grid over a map of the city and used it as a chessboard (playing against himself, as he was used to doing), the movements of the winning pieces would tell him where the company's influence was directed. The losing king's position would tell him where Peter's house was; he had forgotten the address, and their name was not in the phone book. He was shivering in a dressing-gown, searching through his shelves for a nonexistent town plan, when the pattern allowed him to admit that he could find Peter's house quite easily by memory. He hurried back to bed and pressed his eyes into the pillow before they could project the previous night's dream. He had been lying in the middle of a small bedroom, with pink curtains and a dull crucifix on the wall. A man had stepped toward him in the half-light; his face was invisible, but his outstretched hands were dark with soot. Just before

touching him the hands had drawn back to peel off thin gray gloves, which he had hung up like paper bags on the crucifix. But when they had

fluttered back to him the hands were still gray.

When he got off the bus the fixed, cloudless brightness of the November day made the facades of houses resemble postcards. Gaps made by demolition punctuated the series. Daniel tried to ignore the sequence of missing buildings; the pattern might lead him astray. If this was the right way, they must have filled in some of the trenches and dug new ones. He was becoming certain that he had lost his way when a Watneys pub held up the black weight of its name on a sign: The Anvil. On a bench outside, two men sat asleep, cocooned in layers of frayed clothing. He could recognize some of the posters on the boards-somebody had scratched out the middle of the word WORKERS to expose a pop star's face—but the dissected house whose red staircase he had seen was now a patch of rubble-strewn ground where weeds were already growing. On the off-white side wall of the next house, graffiti were interlaced so densely at the eye level that one could read anything into the scribbling. Surely this was the road, where a young boy in cut-off jeans was running across to bowl a tennis ball into the passageway between two houses. Dodging the airborne stroke that followed, he walked down and examined each house for signs of familiarity. Unexpectedly, he found himself looking through a line of railings; below, a drowned-looking black barge was adrift on the canal, its curtains drawn. Neither the boat nor the litter of leaves and twigs on the surface appeared to be moving. It was the next house, he remembered; but it had a ragged privet hedge instead of a wall, enclosing rose bushes stripped down to thorns. He must be in the wrong street, he realized, but recognized the house opposite as he turned. One of its upper windows wore a board like an eye patch; the result of vandals, he supposed.

There was no answer to his knock, but the flaking door creaked open at the pressure. The inner door was ajar; he pushed through it. "Hello? Mrs. Telford?" Then he coughed at the sharp dust which the draught loosed from the carpet. Damp painted a forest in the hall. Dust filled in the angles of the stairs. Obviously this house, whatever it was, had not been lived in for years.

From the unlit front room there came a regular clicking sound.

"Hello? Come in." It was her voice. The carpet felt puffy underfoot. In the front room he could hear water dripping onto the ceiling. The window where Peter had flinched from his reflection had been smashed also, but not boarded. The draught took the door from his hand and slammed it. "Oh, Danny. It's you." Mrs. Telford's bright eyes did not focus at all. She was running the shuttles back and forth on the loom as efficiently as ever, though the wood seemed darker and warped out of true. There were no threads attached to the shuttles.

"Is Peter here?" Daniel said, and sneezed painfully.

"I've finished the cloth, look!" She pointed to a thick roll on the tea-table. Daniel repeated his question.

"He's upstairs. In the music room." Daniel made his way cautiously up the uneven stairs, holding on to the banister until it suddenly lurched away from the wall. The door to the music room was open. He looked in at the figure hunched over the piano. Peter's hands ran over the keys, but no sound came. Daniel shivered; was he deaf? Sweat tickled his back like a cold wire. There was a strong antiseptic smell in the room. He sneezed again, and heard it.

"Peter. It's Danny, what are you doing?" The silent performance continued. Daniel crossed the floor toward the helpless Christ, then turned to the piano. Peter's eyes were closed; he did not appear to be breathing. Tiny clouds of dust appeared from between the keys as he played. Now that he was close, Daniel could make out an almost entirely muffled thud from within the piano at each note. He realized that it was choked up with dust. In the middle of a tune, Peter stopped and opened his eyes.

"Peter. What's wrong?" The player looked at his hands. They were scrubbed pink and recently scarred with scratches. Dust was beginning to smear the fingertips. Some black material was lodged under the nails. Slowly, he began to rub his hands, like a Lady Macbeth in a silent film, and then to rip at the skin with his nails. Blood ran down onto the piano keys. Daniel's face flushed, but he could not cry, he was not capable of it. When his hands were red-gloved, Peter reached down under the stool and lifted a large bottle and a wad of cotton-wool. He dabbed antiseptic solution from the bottle onto his hands, wiped away the diluted stain, and swabbed the skin clean with fresh solution. His expression had still not changed (indeed, he wore no expression at all) as he put away the bottle and the cotton-wool and, closing his eyes, commenced to play what looked like the same tune as before.

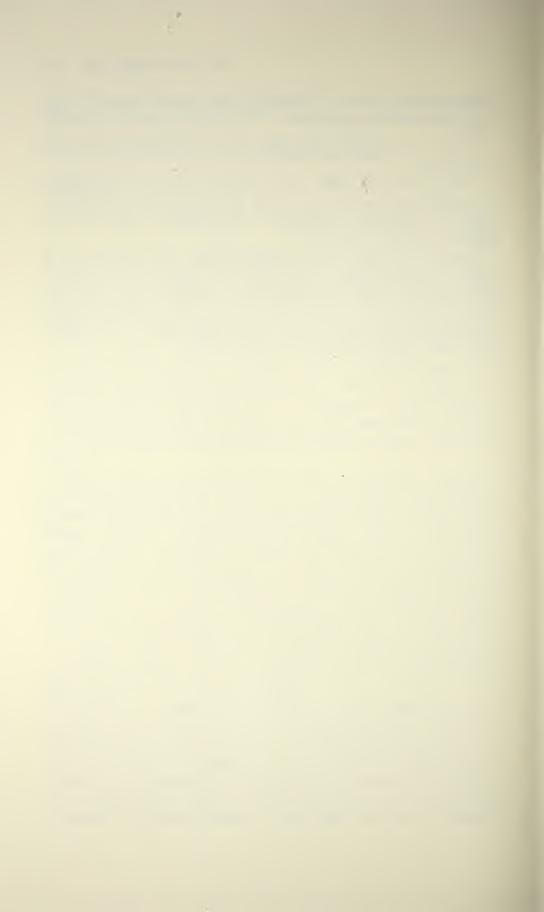
Descending the stairs less carefully than he had climbed them, Daniel stood for a while in the hall, then went back into the front room. Mrs. Telford looked up at him and smiled. Her hands still shifted the vacant shuttles. "Look at the tapestry, go on. It's finished." He picked up the bundle of cloth and unrolled it. The material was soft and light, pleasant to the touch. He held it up to the light: the pattern was composed of innumerable tiny black and white squares. "Stand back from it," she said.

"Then you'll see what it is." Daniel spread it on the floor and looked down. He stared for some time. Then he looked straight up at Mrs. Telford.

"I can't see anything in it." He rolled up the cloth tightly and set it back

"Then you'll be all right," she said. "It can't hurt you." She watched the nonexistent threads on her loom. Her hands slid back and forth. regular as a pendulum. A few minutes later, she said: "That's all, you've nothing to do here. Good-bye."

Daniel was outside and anesthetized by the cold, sharp winter air before he realized that, for the second time, he had forgotten to say good-bye to Mrs. Telford. He continued to walk toward the bus stop, still wondering quite what had changed in him. But it was too difficult to know. He found himself wishing it would rain, though the sound would be entirely drowned out by the rush hour traffic.



# The Godmother

### Tina Rath

When I first read "The Godmother" by Tina Rath in Ghosts & Scholars 8, the mordant elegance of the prose made me suspect that Tanith Lee might be playing a game of pseudonyms. A query to editor Rosemary Pardoe ended my hopes for a detective career: Tina Rath is indeed Tina Rath. Further, she has had stories published in the respected anthology series, The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories and The Fontana Book of Horror Stories, as well as in such magazines as Amazing, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Women's Realm and Catholic Fireside.

Of herself, Rath says: "I was born in 1943, in Surrey, because of the bombing, but I am a Londoner. I have a B.A. from London University, an M.A. from North London Polytechnic (my dissertation was on the Theatrical Vampire) and I am currently working on my Ph.D. in vampire fiction." Wonder about the job market on that.

"SHE'S BEEN LIKE this all morning, doctor."

Old Mrs. Rothiemay heard her granddaughter's voice, querulous as usual, but now with an undertone of some more positive emotion. Anxiety? Or could it be hope?

"Is she really bad?"

Then the doctor's rumblings, harder to make out, because she was less used to his voice, but clearly offering reassurance, suggesting perhaps that there was a lot of it about. Mrs. Rothiemay, a gripper all her life, gripped the sheets, and wished the voices away. She was such a very old woman now that she could only manage one thing at a time. Now she did not want to listen, but to think, to remember. Gratefully she let herself sink away from the voices, back through the years . . . A last, shrill exclamation from her granddaughter held her back, but only for a moment:

"She's been like this ever since Den brought her the paper up."

Mrs. Rothiemay had started life in the last century as Susannah Deborah Jewkes, named for her aunt Deborah and her godmother, Susannah Paget. Mrs. Paget had proved the better investment. When her namesake was twelve years old she found her a place at Satterthwaite, the big house where she reigned as housekeeper. Aunt Deb had been good for nothing but a plain cross and chain of doubtful metal. The young Susannah, or Sukey as she was called, had even then a well developed sense for personal property. She wore the cross permanently round her neck, where it left a greenish mark, to keep it away from her sisters. But she was well aware that Mrs. Paget was a more glittering prize. In the weeks before she went away she drove her family nearly mad with her accounts of the splendors of Satterthwaite and the glorious life she would lead there.

It was useless for her mother to point out that she was going as scullery maid, and not as an adopted daughter, and that scullery maids do not, as a rule, wear black silk dresses and eat roast chicken every day. Mrs. Paget might indeed wear silk, but she was the housekeeper. And she would only wear it on Sundays and holidays. And, as for chicken, words failed her! Nevertheless Sukey went on with her tales. It was unfortunate perhaps that Mrs. Paget arrived to take her to Satterthwaite wearing a silk dress so rich that it could have stood without the support of its wearer's ample figure, with silk petticoats audible beneath it, and *silk* stockings! The stockings alone were enough to give a normal child delusions of grandeur, besides giving a prudent mother pause for thought.

Mrs. Jewkes studied her old friend carefully as they sat sipping tea and talking over old times, and wondered about those stockings. They certainly were silk. She could hear the rasp as Mrs. Paget crossed her ankles. And was that ring on Mrs. Paget's large white hand a diamond? Was it possible that such things could be come by honestly, and if not was she right to let Sukey go? But after all, Sue had always been a saving woman, and who else had she to spend the money on but herself? Besides both stockings and rings could have been presents. Upper servants were often given such things by grateful employers . . . she did not want to stand in Sukey's way . . . and she wanted the child out of the house. She was undisciplined, lazy, and as inquisitive as a monkey.

So Mrs. Jewkes contented herself with fervently kissing her daughter, reminding her of her prayers and her duty and bidding her write a line now and again, to say how she did.

"You don't want to fret about her," said Mrs. Paget, comfortably. "Satterthwaite's not China, nor yet Tartary."

And Mrs. Jewkes dabbed her eyes with her apron, obscurely comforted

by these self-evident truths.

She might have felt some disquiet had she seen her daughter's reception at Satterthwaite. Do even housekeepers, she might have asked, go to the front door? And are they let in quite so respectfully by a man-servant?

"Ah, Thomas," said Mrs. Paget to the great fine gentleman who opened the door to Sukey and herself, a gentleman so fine that Sukey took him for the master, until her godmother spoke, "you can tell the master that I've brought the little girl. I'll take her to my room and give her some dinner for we're both tired after the journey, but when we've had a bite and sup I'll bring her to see him."

And up the great stairs they went to a room that Sukey thought grand enough for the Queen herself, that Mrs. Paget called her sitting-room, and there they sat and had dinner brought to them. They really did eat roast chicken, with bread sauce and vegetables all complete and after that a sort of creamy pudding. Her godmother drank wine with the meal, but Sukey, somewhat to her disappointment, drank milk. The grandeur of her surroundings and her mother's warnings about good behavior kept her silent, and her godmother seemed pleased with her. After their dinner Sukey, under instructions, washed her face and tidied her hair and then went pattering after her godmother's dark bulk like a pet lamb through the long, ill-lit corridors of Satterthwaite, to meet her new employer.

It was here that she had her first shock. A little before they reached his room Mrs. Paget bent down and murmured that she was not be to afraid, but the master was not quite well and had to sit mainly in the dark for the light hurt his eyes. Sukey was to curtsey as she had been taught, and say yes sir and no sir, and not ask questions. It had not crossed her mind to question the master, but she would dearly have liked to question Mrs. Paget. She was given no time, but hurried into the dark room, dark not only with the night, but muffled from floor to ceiling with great long velvet curtains and lit only by a little fire. There was a sickly sweet smell as if someone had been burning pastilles, and underneath that something rather unpleasant that caught at the throat and made Sukey think, for no reason that she could imagine, of Farmer Tyson's beast vard.

Mrs. Paget stopped just inside the door and pushed Sukey forward.

"I've brought the little girl," she said.

A thin, petulant voice from the gloom said: "Well, bring her in, bring her in. Don't stand in the doorway like that!"

Mrs. Paget seemed inclined to send Sukey in alone, but she clung to

her skirt and in the end she guided the child across the dark room until they came very close to the wing chair by the fire where the master sat. Sukey curtseyed, then as no one said anything she dared to raise her eyes and look at him. She was almost shocked into an exclamation of surprise. She had been expecting a sick old man huddled up in rugs, wrinkled like grandfather Jewkes. Instead he was young and almost angelically beautiful. True he was pale, and his brilliant golden head hung back in the chair as if he were too tired to hold it upright, but even his pallor was beautiful, like marble. Sukey, forgetting her manners, stared and stared.

At last he spoke, still in that thin, weak voice: "So. This is Sukey."

"Yes sir, if you please sir," said Sukey, bobbing another curtsey to be on the safe side.

The effort of speaking those few words seemed to have exhausted him and there was another long pause.

And then he said a rather strange thing:

"And you named her?"

"I named her," said Mrs. Paget in a queer, solemn way, like someone making a response in church.

The master's great blue eyes closed. Sukey half thought he was dead, but Mrs. Paget shook her gently and whispered: "He's gone to sleep. Quietly now!"

And they both tiptoed away. The dim corridor seemed quite bright after that dark room and Sukey blinked. She opened her mouth to ask the dozen questions that were buzzing in her head, beginning with "What's wrong with him then?" and going on to "What did he mean, asking if you named me?", but Mrs. Paget hurried her along so fast that she got no time to ask anything at all.

She took her back to her own rooms. Her bedroom led off the sitting-room, and off that again was a little room which she called a powder room—giving Sukey some uneasiness as she took it to mean the place where the gunpowder was kept—where a truckle bed had been set up. Still giving Sukey no time to talk she told her to get herself undressed and into bed as soon as she liked, for she must be tired. Once she was in bed Mrs. Paget came in, both to take away the candle for fear of fire, and to give her a cup of milk, with honey, to help her sleep. Warm milk and honey must have had a wonderfully soothing power for, in spite of the strangeness of the bed and all those unanswered questions, she fell asleep at once.

The next day came remarkably close to Sukey's dreams of life at Satterthwaite. After a breakfast of bread and milk taken in her godmother's room, Mrs. Paget told her that, although by rights she should now go to the kitchen to start her new duties, "the whole house is quite at sixes and sevens what with the master being so bad, and Mrs. Colleywood, Cook that is, can't be doing with you down there for a while. So if you'll sit quiet up here and let me see what sort of a hand you are with the needle, like a good girl, maybe you could take a walk in the garden this afternoon. We'll see."

"Is the master going to die?" Sukey inquired cheerfully.

Mrs. Paget took a quick shocked breath. "Why no, bless you, he gets these bad turns regular. He'll be right as ninepence in a day or two."

Sukey tried to see that strange, sick figure "right as ninepence" and failed. Nevertheless she held her tongue and took her godmother's needlework bag when it was offered, with another bag stuffed with scraps of cloth and bits of ribbon, and settled to work. She was very handy with her needle when she cared to be and she set herself the task of making a little tablecloth in patchwork, each patch edged with ribbon. Working with such pretty stuffs, at her own pace, gazing out of the window when she cared to or taking a turn round the room to admire her godmother's handsome china ornaments, hardly seemed like work to Sukey and she was able to pass the morning very agreeably, though about eleven it came on to rain and she could take no more pleasure in the window.

Mrs. Paget brought her a lunch of cold bread and meat and admired her sewing.

"Why I never saw such fine stitches! You could get to be a lady's maid, Sukey, if you work hard and mind your manners."

Sukey was flattered but somehow she did not feel that her godmother really had her mind on what she was saying. She broke right through Sukey's discussion of whether a glossy green edging or a dull purple one would look best on a patch of crimson silk to say: "I'm afraid the weather's changed, Sukey, as you can see, and you can't walk out this afternoon. I must be about my work so you stay here like a good child. There are some magazines you can look at if you get tired of sewing."

And she hurried off, without waiting for Sukey's answer. Now, Sukey had been unnaturally good for one whole day and a half. She had watched her tongue and minded her manners and studied to please her godmother. But now, left to her own devices for a whole afternoon it was not surprising that her good behavior should become somewhat strained.

At first she went back to her sewing, flattered by Mrs. Paget's praise of her stitches. But she still could not make up her mind about the edging and began to think that a rest might do her good. Following the housekeeper's instructions she looked round for the magazines she had

been given leave to read. They were not immediately visible, so she began to hunt for them, and found at once a much more absorbing task than either reading or sewing. She began to poke and pry through every drawer and cupboard.

If this was an amusement in Mrs. Paget's sitting-room it was a positive fascination in her bedroom. Sukey was neat-fingered, and knew the penalties of discovery very well. Careful to leave no trace she sorted delicately through drawers full of scented underlinen, took her godmother's dresses from their hangers to hold them against her own skinny shoulders, and spent a long time over the jewel box, admiring the effect of the glittering stones and shiny metal against her own neck and ears. It was at the bottom of the jewel box that she found a small brass key. Now, nothing in either room, not even Mrs. Paget's desk, had been locked. Sukey, her curiosity really roused now, determined to find what lock the key fitted.

It was so small that at first she looked for a small box, coming close to disaster when she opened a tiny coffer on the dressing table that proved to be full of face-powder and nearly spilled it all over the floor. When she could not find a box she went back to the desk to search for a locked or better still, a secret drawer. Again there was no such thing. Back she went to the bedroom. All the cupboards there opened easily. She drifted to the middle of the room, uncertain, half willing to give up the search and go back to her sewing. After all, her godmother would very probably soon be back. The afternoon that had been so dark and rainy was ending in a wild golden sunset. It would soon be night . . . and then, in those last golden rays she caught sight of a glitter on the dark paneled wall. Idly she went to see what it might be.

It was, of course, a tiny keyhole. She slipped the key inside, turned it and pulled. The paneling swung open to reveal a hidden cupboard, as tall as a man, but very narrow. Hanging inside was what Sukey took to be a dressing gown of very thin red silk, trimmed with gold. There was more silk on the floor, apparently wrapped around something. And there was a picture painted on the inside of the door, a life-size figure that Sukey characterized as "mucky." Even as she stopped to investigate the silken wrappings on the floor she heard Mrs. Paget's step in the corridor.

She shut and locked the door, put the key back where she had found it, launched herself back into the sitting-room and was sitting at her sewing, with nothing but a slightly heightened color to betray her when Mrs. Paget came in.

Sukey came very close to mentioning her discovery. If she had not found the key while meddling with the jewel box she might have done so. It never crossed her mind that Mrs. Paget knew of the hidden cupboard, and its strange contents, and certainly not about the picture. She supposed they had all belonged to a previous owner, probably one of the gentry who were well known to admire that sort of thing, and the key had simply been tidied away by Mrs. Paget. But one thing her mother had impressed on her was that meddling was wrong. It could lead to a box on the ears and bed with no supper. Best, she told herself, to keep quiet.

Her godmother seemed even more agitated than she had that morning. She praised Sukey's work again, though anyone but a fool could have seen how little she had done of it, then rustled up and down the room, like a large and agitated moth. When at last she settled it was on a chair a good distance from Sukey and though she began to talk to her she

seemed curiously unwilling to look her in the face.

"You know, Sukey dear," she began, "that gentlemen, and ladies too, have all sorts of odd ways . . ." and then she hesitated for so long that Sukey thought she had finished and put a few more stitches into her patchwork. But then she started again: "Well, the master has got it into his head that he wants to sit out in the garden. Now, with his eyes being so bad he can only go out at nighttime. He'll want things fetched to him, and of course I must wait on him, it's no more than my duty, but I don't care for walking through the grounds alone at night, so I thought that perhaps you, Sukey, could go along with me. You could sleep late tomorrow, you know," she added.

"Yes, I'll walk with you and welcome," said Sukey as she had been taught. "But won't the master take cold?"

"Oh, he'll have a fire," Mrs. Paget said, briskly. Now her message had been delivered she seemed calmer, though she would eat no dinner, and went to lie down for a while when Sukey had eaten hers, promising to call her when it was time to go to the master.

Sukey went back to her sewing. The evening dragged on. It seemed to her that it was almost morning when her godmother called her, though in fact it was not quite midnight, as she saw by the little traveling clock beside the bed. Mrs. Paget was already wrapped in a black cloak. She wound Sukey in a shawl and gave her a covered basket to carry, then led her not down the main staircase but through some narrow passageways and down a steep flight of backstairs, through the empty kitchens and across the stable yard. It was not especially cold, but very dark. The rainclouds had come back and there was neither moon nor star to be seen. Sukey tried to ask a question or two, but she was immediately

hushed, and once they were in the park she found she needed all her breath to keep up.

They seemed to walk a very long way, through shrubbery, across a wide expanse of dark grass, and then downhill, until Sukey smelled stagnant water and saw the lake glimmering ahead. They walked along the lake shore for some way and then at last they glimpsed a fire in the distance. As they got closer Sukey saw that the master had not one fire but four.

They were burning in cast iron braziers, set, though Sukey did not know at the time, at the four points of the compass, in a strange white building that was mostly pillars. He was feeding one of the fires, and he looked worse than Sukey remembered. He was sweating, and he had clearly not even the strength to dress properly for outdoors, for he was wearing what she took to be a long white nightshirt that left his arms bare.

"You're late," he said, in his faded voice, "I can hardly hold him."

Mrs. Paget briskly shed her cloak and began feeding another brazier from a little basket that lay beside it. Sukey was shocked to see that she was wearing nothing but the thin silk robe from the secret cupboard.

Heavy wreaths of smoke, some sweet, some acrid billowed across their faces. The master stood up, wiping his face.

"Take the child into the circle," he said.

Mrs. Paget went white. "What!" she hissed, "I know a trick worth two of that! Take her in yourself. I've done my part."

Sukey looked round for the circle they were talking about and saw it, drawn in what looked like brownish chalk on the white marble floor. There seemed no reason why anyone should be as frightened by it as Mrs. Paget and the master so obviously were. Sukey yielded to her curiosity and stepped in of her own accord to see what all the fuss was about.

And at once she knew. The floor seemed to open in a sickening downward spiral and at the same time it could not be opening because she did not fall, although she felt all the horrible sensations of falling. Yet it must be opening for Something was coming through it. Sukey felt herself being engulfed in this Something in the most horrible way. The physical sensations might be compared to being drowned in freezing sewage, that burned like acid while it froze. The mental were indescribable, but included a sort of sickness of the mind that she was sure would have sent her mad if it had gone on a moment longer. For it stopped quite suddenly. The Thing rejected her, literally hurling her outside the circle, beyond the light of the braziers.

She landed on her face in the grass. For a moment she lay still, until the sound of her godmother's screams spurred her into action. She stood up, some instinct warning her not to look behind, and ran for the house. But however fast she ran, however often she fell, and stumbled up again and ran on, she did not lose her grip on that christening gift from her Aunt Deborah, that cross of dubious metal but undoubted power that she found herself clutching so tightly in her hand.

The scandal, when it broke next morning, was only concerned with the master who had been found beside the lake, half naked and wholly dead, and Mrs. Paget who was still just alive, but "quite silly like" and wearing what appeared to be a red silk nightdress of the most indecent sort. The discovery in the lake of a collection of bones that seemed to have belonged to quite a number of young girls was hushed up. And Sukey never talked.

She never told anyone, either, of what she found in her godmother's secret cupboard. In fact, she burned it before any one could see it, which was a pity perhaps. A contract with the devil's own signature might have interested a number of people. But Sukey felt justified. No one likes to make public that she has been sold to Satan by her own godmother, and that there appeared to be no escape clause.

The master's will was made public, and caused quite a lot of gossip. He gave instructions that he should be buried in a room built on to the family mausoleum especially for him. He was to be sitting in a chair, fully dressed, in his everyday clothes, with a bottle in his hand. The floor was to be sprinkled with certain herbs and a quantity of broken glass. The gossips said that all this was to prevent the devil collecting his body. His soul had already been lost that night by the lake when he failed to deliver whatever he had agreed to provide, every seven years, in return for long life, riches and beauty.

It was all a lot of nonsense, of course. Sukey had been sent to a less glamorous but safer place, grown up, married, and tried to forget. Over the years she had managed to persuade herself that everything had indeed been some sort of nightmare, the product of an overactive imagination . . .

But now Mrs. Rothiemay had been forced to reconsider. It had been the half forgotten name of Satterthwaite that had drawn her eye to the newspaper item with its unpromising headline: "So much for tradition." It told, reasonably accurately, what it described as the legend of how the master of Satterthwaite had been buried, and described how that little room had been opened recently by a curious historian, wishing to check the accuracy of what he called "folk memory."

#### Tina Rath 620

Of course, he had found that the story had been all nonsense. The room was quite empty.

The devil, Mrs. Rothiemay could see, was not so easily cheated.

# "Pale Trembling Youth"

## W. H. Pugmire and Jessica Amanda Salmonson

W.H. Pugmire (a.k.a. Wilum Hogfrog Pugmire) is well known to members of Lovecraftian fandom for his many contributions to the fan press. Born in Seattle, Washington on May 3, 1951, Pugmire began seriously writing fiction in the early '70s after serving two years in Ireland as a Mormon missionary. Disgusted with his early tales, he stopped writing for seven years, at which time he became involved in the local Seattle punk underground, publishing his fanzine, Punk Lust, for five years. At the urging of Salmonson, he has recently returned to writing fiction. Pugmire says that his hobbies are "dressing up like Boy George and cruising construction sites."

Jessica Amanda Salmonson is another wild talent from Seattle, and a writer who has moved from the small press to the big leagues, but who still finds time for fiction and poetry for the fan publications—in fact, she edits the small press magazines, Fantasy Macabre and Fantasy & Terror. She has written a number of fantasy novels, edited fantasy series (Amazons and Heroic Visions), and has a horror novel forthcoming.

The following collaborative effort appeared in Dennis Etchison's Cutting Edge, a groundbreaking anthology of contemporary horror. Not all

horrors are drowned in blood.

DYKES, KIKES, spics, micks, fags, drags, gooks, spooks . . . more of us are outsiders than aren't; and that's what the dear young ones too often fail to see. They think they've learned it all by age fifteen. Perhaps they have. But they're not the only ones who've learned it.

They're wise youngsters, no doubt about it, and I wish them all survival, of one kind or another, though few of them will have it. They're out there on the streets at night; they've spiked their hair and dyed it; they've put roofing nails through their earlobes and scratched their lovers' initials in the whites of their eyes. And they're such beauties, these children. I have empathy for them, though by their standards, at thirty, I'm an old man. Am I a dirty old man? Perhaps. But I keep my hands to myself and am outraged by the constant exploitation I have seen. I help who I can, when I can. They laugh at me for it; I don't mind. Much as they hate to admit it, they appreciate the helping hand; they assuredly need it.

The new bands have power. They have raw, wild, gorgeous, naive energy. The temporary nature of these bands, the transience of the sound they create, the ephemeral nature of their performances and their youth has a literal and symbolic truth to it that breaks my heart. Ah, the dear young ones! Their own parents hate them. Their parents hate themselves. How morosely, pathetically beautiful it all is!

But I have my criticisms. I don't tell them what to do with their lives, but I do tell them they're not the first and only ones to *know*. They all think they've invented it; invented everything. Twelve-year-old artists of the street—don'tever doubt that some of them are geniuses—their music, dress, and Xerox flyers are undeniably brilliant works of art. Stripped of technical gaudiness and the veneer of social dishonesty, these kids and their art alienate people because of the reality that's exposed.

Reality is pain.

But none of it is new. A punk who's a good friend, a good kid, I gave him a rare old dada poster for his birthday. He loved it. He thought it was something new. "No, sir," I told him. "It was printed before World War I." He was impressed. He got some white paste and smeared it onto the window of an uptown jewelry store. What brilliance! It breaks my heart.

So there's nothing new. Least of all pain. It's the oldest thing around. I want to tell them, "Yes, you're outsiders. Yes, this thing you're feeling really is pain. But you're not alone." Or you're not alone in being alone. A poison-bad planet. For everyone.

On the north side of Lake Union, visible from about any high point in and around the city, is a little spot called Gas Works Park. Considering how visible it is on the lake's edge, it's rather out of the way. It has the appearance of war's aftermath—a bombed factory. When the gasworks closed shop several decades back, no one knew what to do with that extraordinary network of chimneys and pipes and silos. For years they sat rusting. Then someone had the fat idea of painting the whole thing, laying a lawn, and calling it a park. It looks good. It looks monstrous. It is urban decadence at its best and worst. It's not much frequented at night.

A pathetic old faggot took me across on his sailboat. He's not only pathetic, but rich; spent his whole life "buying" his way to the inside. But he's an outsider, too. We met in a downtown park in the days of my own alienated childhood, when he wasn't much younger but his gums were less black; and we've pretended we're friends ever since.

I'd been on his boat most of the late afternoon and early evening, until the sun was going down. Then I said, "I don't need to go back into town. Let me ashore at Gas Works Park."

He let me off. I stood on the concrete landing and waved to the old man, who looked almost heroic pulling at the rigging—but not quite.

The sun had set. The last streaks of orange were visible beyond the city's silhouette. The skyscrapers south of the lake were shining like boxes full of stars. I turned my back, climbed the grassy knoll, and gazed toward the antiquated gasworks. The garish paint had been rendered invisible by the darkness.

I breathed deeply of the cold, clean evening air and felt invigorated. The decayed structure before me was huge, the skeleton of a gargantuan beast. Its iron pipes, winding steel stairs and catwalks, variety of ladders, planks, chains, and tanks had a very real aesthetic charm. "Danger—keep off," a sign read on a chain-link fence. Even in the darkness, the evidence of the structure's conquerors—their graffiti—was palely visible on the surface of its heights.

Hearing footsteps in the gravel behind me, I turned and saw a tall skinhead punk shambling toward the fence. He nodded and smiled at me, then leaned toward the fence, curling fingers around the links. I thought I detected a sadness in his eyes. He was looking upward into one particular part of the gasworks, with such intensity that I could not help but follow his gaze. It seemed that he was staring at a particular steel stairway that led up and into a long pipe.

The sound of his deep sigh made me look at him again. He had taken a pack of cigarettes from a pocket in his black leather jacket. "Smoke?" he offered, holding the pack toward me.

"No, thank you," I replied. Kindness and gentility, contrasted against a violent image, no longer surprised me in these youths.

"Something else, ain't it?" he said, nodding at the structure.

"It is," I replied, not in a mood for conversation.

He continued: "My band and I used to come here at midnight to record tapes of us banging on parts of it. Fucking inspiration! You get some really cool sounds."

"You're in a punk band?" I asked lamely.

"Naw. Industrial band. Kind of an offshot of punk and hard-core, a lot of screaming and banging on pipes and weird electronic sounds. Put it all together and it makes an intense noise."

"Hmmm," I said, having trouble imagining why anyone would want to sit around banging on pipes and screaming. I must, occasionally, admit to a gap between this generation and mine.

"But we broke up," he continued in a quiet voice. "Our singer hanged himself. Up there." He turned to gaze once more at that particular section of the structure. I felt a chill. Talk of death was unpleasant to me, and this was too sudden an introduction of the subject.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Yeah, it's sad. He had a great voice. He could scream and make you feel like you'd die. Then he could sing so tenderly you couldn't hold back tears. But he was messed up. His dad was always getting drunk and beating on him, so he took to the streets. Came to live with me and some others in an abandoned building. We called him Imp, he was so small. He'd never eat, just drink coffee and do a lot of speed. He shook all the time and he had so little color to his skin that some of us took to calling him the 'pale trembling youth,' which he didn't like as much as Imp."

He paused to take a drag from his cigarette. The night had grown especially dark. The gasworks stood silently before us and seemed to listen to the young man's tale.

"He really loved this place. Used to come at night with a wrench or hammer to investigate sounds. He slept here a lot. He'd bring his girls here."

He stopped again, his face sad.

"His last girlfriend killed herself with sleeping pills. He loved her like none of the others. A few days later he was found up there, swinging from that pipe, his studded belt around his broken neck."

"How old was he?

"Sixteen." After a pause, he tossed his cigarette to the ground and shoved his hands into pockets. "Well, it's getting cold. Think I'll head on back to the District and find me some anarchy and beer." He smiled kindly. I returned his smile. "Nice talking to you." We nodded to each other. He turned and stalked into the darkness.

It had indeed grown cold, but as I turned to look once more at the weird structure, I felt drawn near. Looking with dismay at the fence before me, I took hold of it and began to climb.

When I reached the top of the fence, I moaned softly at the difficulty climbing over and down the other side. I felt cold air against my neck. Looking at a section of the gasworks where the punk had taken his life, I thought I saw a shadowy figure watching me. Then the shadows blended and the image was gone.

Wind played with my hair. With sudden resolve, I climbed over the top of the fence, almost falling down the other side.

I stood near a huge rusted pipe. It was perhaps forty feet long and five feet high. I felt a thrill of boyish excitement, for I have had a love of tunnels since I was small. Going to one end of the pipe, I stood to look inside.

I entered.

My footfalls echoed weirdly as my boots hit the metal surface. The sides felt cold and rough. When I reached the middle, I sat down, bending knees to chest, listening to the sounds of evening. Then I heard a pinging, coming from the end of the pipe that I had entered. I looked and saw a small person standing there, looking at me. From its stance I took it to be a boy. The figure held something in its hand, which it slowly, nonchalantly struck against the pipe. Then my vision seemed to blur. I rubbed my eyes with shaky fingers; when I looked again, I saw nothing.

I sat for what seemed endless moments. Finally, I raised myself on unsteady legs.

From above came a sudden banging, a horrible and ferocious sound, as though a madman were leaping from place to place and violently striking at pipes and metal surfaces with something large. The sound of it shook the pipe I was in. I felt the reverberations like a throbbing pain in my skull. Shouting in alarm, I fell to my knees, covering my ears with moist palms. On and on it went, until I was sure that I would lose my mind.

Then it stopped. For a few moments all I could hear was the ringing in my ears. Then another sound came to me: low sobbing. I had never heard such misery and loneliness in a voice. It tore my heart to listen to it. It froze my soul. Gradually it faded into silence.

I was too weak to rise. When at last I found the strength, I crawled weakly out of the pipe, into the waiting dark.



# Red Light

## David J. Schow

A relative newcomer to the field, David J. Schow has become a favorite of readers and reviewers with his entries in The Year's Best Horror Stories. It has to be a matter of writing excellence, since each story evoked a different mood than the others—and "Red Light" is no exception.

The versatile David J. Schow was born on July 13, 1955, in Marburg, West Germany—a German orphan adopted by American parents. After seeing the world in his younger days, Schow seems to have settled in Los Angeles. His short fiction has appeared in Twilight Zone Magazine, Night Cry, Weird Tales, Whispers, and elsewhere, and he has been a columnist for various publications and a contributing editor to film books. His most recent opus is The Outer Limits: The Official Companion from Ace—the long-expected guide to that television series. Schow has also written some sixteen television/film tie-ins and series books, under various names. Under his own name, look out for The Kill Riff and The Shaft, both horror novels from Tor. Meanwhile Schow is busy over a pair of horror anthologies. He admits to having invented the term "splatterpunk" at a very-late-night party.

TABLOID HEADLINES always make me laugh. You know: I Aborted Bigfoot's Quints, or See Elvis' Rotting Nude Corpse, or Exclusive on Jack the Ripper's Grandson! Earlier today, while passing one of those Market Street news vendors, I saw similar hyperbolic screamers, and I laughed. I did not want to laugh: it came out as a sick coughing sound.

TASHA VODE STILL MISSING
Terrorist Kidnapping
of International Cover Girl
Not Ruled Out

What the hell did they know about her? Not what I knew. They were like vampires; they sucked, ethically. Morally.

But what did that make me?

At the top of the dungheap was the good old *National Perspirer*, the hot, steaming poop on Tasha's disappearance, and how one of three juicy fates had befallen her. One: She had pulled a Marilyn Monroe. Two: She had had a Dorothy Stratten pulled *on* her by some gonzo fruitbag lover. Three: She was tucked away in the Frances Farmer suite at some remote, tastefully isolated lunatic asylum.

Or maybe she was forking over richly to manufacture all this furious controversy in order to boost her asking price up into the troposphere—in a word, hoax time.

It was pathetic. It made my gut throb with hurt and loss, and downtown San Francisco diffused behind a hot salt-wash of welling tears. I blamed the emissions of the Cal Trans buses lumbering up and down the street, knowing full well I couldn't cop such a rationalization, because the buses ran off electricity, like the mostly-defunct streetcars. Once, I'd nearly been decapitated by one of the rooftop conductor poles when it broke loose from the overhead webwork of wires and came swinging past, boomlow, alongside the moving bus, sparking viciously and banging off a potted sidewalk tree a foot above my head, zizzing and snapping. Welcome to the Bay Area.

I had no real excuse for tears now, and wiped my eyes with the heel of my hand. My left hand; my good hand. I was still getting used to the weight of the new cast on my other one. One of our famous denizens of the streets had stopped to stare at me. I stared back, head to toe, from the cloud of gnats around his matted hair to the solid-carbon crustiness of his bare, black feet. He had caught me crying, with his mad-prophet eyes, and the grin that snaked his face lewdly open suggested that yes, I should howl, with grief, I should pull out a Mauser and start plugging pedestrians. I put my legs in gear instead, leaving him behind with the news kiosk, the scungy, sensationalist headlines, and all those horrifyingly flawless pictures of her. The bum and I ceased to exist for each other the moment we parted.

I know what happened to Tasha. Like a recurring dream, she showed up unannounced on my doorstep just four days ago. Like a ghost then, like a ghost now.

People read *People*. The truth, they never really want to know, and for good reason.

Her real name was Claudia Katz. In 1975, nobody important knew my name, or either of hers, and I'd already shot thousands of pictures of her. When I replaced my el cheapo scoop lamps with electronically synchro-

nized umbrella shades so new that their glitter hurt your eyes even when they weren't flashing, I commemorated the event by photographing her. New Year's Eve, 1974—five seconds before midnight, I let a whole roll rip past on autowind, catching her as she passed from one year into the next. Edited down, that sequence won me a plaque. Today, it's noteworthy only because Tasha is the subject.

"Claudia Katz is too spiky and dykey," she explained later, as she pulled off her workout shirt and aired a chest that would never need the assistance of the Maidenform Corporation, breasts that would soon have the subscribership of *Playboy* eating their fingernails. "Claudia Katz is somebody who does chain mail and leather doggie-collar spreads for Bitch Records. Claudia Katz is not somebody you'll find on the staple page in Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue."

I pushed back an f-stop and refocused. "Part your lips. Stop. Give me the tip of your tongue, just inside your teeth." Her mouth was invitingly moist; the star-filters would trap some nice little highlights. Click-whirr click-whirr. "Tilt your head back. Not so much . . . stop." I got a magnified closeup of the muscles beneath her skin, moving through the slow, programmed dance of positions. My big fan was on, making her amber hair float. "Hands together, arms back over your head. Turn, turn . . . whoa, right there, stop!" Click-whirr—another thousandth of a second, immobilized. "Sports Illustrated? Why bother aiming it at a bunch of beer-swilling beat-offs in baseball caps, anyway?"

"You don't understand the way the world works, do you?" She spoke to the camera lens, because she knew I was in there, watching. "You've got to make people look at your picture and either want you, or want to be you. When they anticipate your next picture, that means they're fantasizing about you. Saying to themselves, 'Geez, I wonder what she looks like in bed, without that damned bathing suit on?'

It was my privilege to know the answer to that one already. Grinning, I baited her: "The women say that, do they?"

"No, not the women, you dork." The warm, come-hither expression on her face was entirely contrary to her tone. She was, after all, very good at her job. *Click-whirr*. "The men. When all the men in the country, in the world, lust for you, then you can say no to the lot of them. If all the men want you, then all the women lust to *be* you. Voilà."

"Excluding lesbians, Tibetan lamas and some Kalahari bushmen." Her reply begged my sarcasm. She expected it. "Not that, um, lust and envy aren't admirable goals . . ."

If I had not been shooting, her brow would have rearranged and a familiar crease would appear between her eyes, indicating her annoy-

ance at my childish, defeatist, irrelevant, smartass remark. And then she'd say—

"You just don't understand." Right on cue. "But I'll be on top someday. You'll see."

"I'd like to see you on top after you finish your shower." It flew out of my mouth before I could stop it. File a lawsuit if you want. "It's your turn."

She decided not to blow up, and rolled her eyes to keep from giggling. Click-whirr. My heart fumbled a beat. I'd just netted a shot of an honest-to-U.S.-Grant human being, peeking out from behind a cover-girl facade of plastic. Nude from the waist up, sensual not from flaunted sexuality, but because her expression let you in on the secret that the whole sham was strictly for laughs and wages. A real woman, not a fantasy image. I wanted that photo. It reduced the rest of the roll to an exhausted, mundane repertoire of tit shots—pretty billboard face, pasted-on bedroom eyes of that inhuman chromium color, the "ideal," a dime per double dozen from one shining sea to the next, from the four-star hookers at the Beverly Hills Hotel to the smartly attired, totally paranoid corporate ladies who took their Manhattan business lunches in neat quarters.

"To hell with the shower," she had said then, lunging at me with mischief in her eyes.

I still have that photo. Not framed, not displayed. I don't make the effort to look at it anymore. I can't.

Claudia—Tasha—got precisely what she wanted. That part you know, unless you've spent the last decade eating wallaby-burgers in the Australian outback. The tiny differences in the way we perceived the world and its opportunities finally grew large enough to wedge between us. Her astronomical income had little to do with it. It was me. I made the classic mistake of trying to keep her by blurting out proclamations of love before my career, my life, was fully mobilized. When you're clawing through the riptide of your twenties, it's like a cosmic rule that you cannot be totally satisfied by your emotional life and your professional life simultaneously. We had been climbing partners, until I put everything on hold to fall in love with her. So she left, and became famous. Not many people know my name even today. They don't have to; I pull down a plush enough income. But it did come to pass that everybody wanted Tasha. Everybody still does.

I was halfway through my third mug of coffee at the Hostel Restaurant when I admitted to myself that I was consciously avoiding going home. Bad stuff waited for me out there. A Latino busboy had made off with my plate. Past the smokey front windows, Geary Street was acruise with the bunboys that gave the Tenderloin its rep. In New York, where things are less euphemistic, they're called fudgepackers. I wondered what gays made of all the media fuss over Tasha.

Nicole was giving me the eye. She's my favorite combat-hardened coffeeshop waitress in the charted universe, an elegant willowsprout of West Indies mocha black, with a heaving bosom and a lilting, exotic way of speaking the English language. When I watch her move about her chores at the Hostel, I think she'd probably jump my bones on the spot if she thought I could click-whirr her into the Tasha Vode saddle—worldwide model, budding cinema star, headliner. And still missing. When I try to formulate some logical nonsense for what happened to her, I fail just like I did with the street bum. Nothing comes out. Instead, I watch Nicole as she strolls over to recharge my cup. She watches me watching her.

"How'd you know I wanted more, Nicole?"

She narrows her panther eyes and blesses me with an evil smile. "Because you white boys always want more, hon."

My house cum studio hangs off the north end of Fieldings' Point Pier, which is owned by a white-maned, sea-salt type named Dickie Barnhardt, whom no mortal dares address as "Richard." He sold me my home and plays caretaker to his pier. I live in a fabulous, indifferently-planned spill-together of rooms, like building blocks dumped haphazardly into a corner. Spiderwebbing it together are twelve crooked little stairways, inside and out. At first I called it my Dr. Seuss House. On the very top is a lighthouse tower that still works. Dickie showed me how to operate it, and from time to time I play keeper of the maritime flame because the notion is so irresistibly romantic. In return for spiffing up the place, I got another plaque—this one from the U.S. Lighthouse Society in San Francisco. Lighthouses have long been outmoded by navigational technology, and the Society is devoted to a program of historical preservation. There's no use for my little beacon. But there are nights when I cannot bear to keep it dark.

After ten years without a postcard, Tasha knew exactly where to find me. Maybe she followed the light. I answered my downstairs door with the alkaline smell of developer clinging to my hands; the doorknob was greened from all the times I'd done it. And there she was.

Was I surprised? I knew instantly it was her, knew it from the way the ocean tilted and tried to slide off the edge of the world, knew it because all the organs in my body tried to rush together and clog up my throat.

"You look like you just swallowed a starfish," she said. She was burrowed into a minky-lush fur that hid everything but the tips of her boots. The chill sea breeze pushed wisps of her hair around. I don't have to describe what her face looked like. If you want to know, just haul your ass down to Slater's Periodicals and check out the covers of any half-dozen current glamour and pop-fashion magazines. *That's* what she looked like, brother.

Her eyes seemed backed up with tears, but maybe tears alone were insufficient to breach the Tasha forcefield, or maybe she used some brand of eyeliner so expensive that it was tear-resistant. I asked her why she was crying, invited her in, and then did not give her room to answer me. I was too busy babbling, trying to race past ten years in ten minutes and disguise my nervousness with light banter. She sensed my disorientation and rode it out, patiently, the way she used to. I fixed coffee and brandy. She sipped hers with picture-perfect lips, sitting at the breakfast overlook I'd glassed in last summer. I needed the drink. She needed contact, and hinted at it by letting her leg brush mine beneath the booth-style table. My need for chitchat and my awareness of the past hung around, dumbing things up like a stubborn chaperone. Beyond the booth's half-turret of windowpanes, green breakers crashed onto the rocks and foamed violently away.

Her eyes cleared, marking time between me and the ocean outside. They grew darkly stormy, registering the thunderheads that were rolling in with the dusk to lash the beach with an evening sweep of rain.

At last I ran out of stupid questions.

She closed my hand up in both of hers. My heartbeat meddled with my breathing. She had already guessed which of my odd little Caligari staircases led to the bedroom loft.

The night sky was embossed by tines of lightning somewhere between us and Japan. Fat drops splatted against the seaward hurricane glass and skidded to the right as a strong offshore wind caught and blew them. I had opened the shutters on the shore side, and the wooden blades of the ceiling fan cast down cool air to prickle our flesh, sweat-speckled from fervent but honest lovemaking.

A lot of women had drifted through my viewfinder after Tasha had left me. Except for two or three mental time-bombs and outright snow queens, I coupled enthusiastically with all of them. I forgot how to say no. Sometimes I was artificially nice; most of the time I was making the entire sex pay because one of their number had dumped me. The right people found out my name, yes. My studio filled up with eager young

lovelies. No brag, just a living. I settled into a pattern of rejecting them about the time they tried to form any sort of lasting attachment, or tried to storm my meticulously erected walls. Some of them were annoyingly persistent, but I got good at predicting when they would turn sloppy and pleading . . . and that made snuffing their flames oddly fulfilling. I was consistent, if not happy. I took a perverse pleasure in booting cover girls out of my bed on a regular basis, and hoped that Joe Normal was envious as hell.

Lust. Envy. Admirable goals, I thought, as she lay with her hair covering my face, both of her legs hugging one of mine. We had turned out to be pretty much alike after all.

When I mumbled, she stirred from her doze. "What . . .?"

"I said, I want a picture of you, just like you are, right this moment."

Her eyes snapped open, gleaming in the faint light. "No." She spoke into the hollow of my neck, her voice distant, the sound of it barely

impressing the air. "No pictures. No more pictures. Ever."

The businessman part of my brain perked up: What neurosis could this be? Was Tasha Vode abandoning her career? Would it be as successful as her abandonment of me? And what was the difference? For what she earned in a month, I could buy the beach frontage below for several miles in both directions. What difference? I'd gotten her back, against all the rules of reality, and here I was looking for the loophole. Her career had cleaved us apart, and now it was making us cleave back together. Funny how a word can have opposing definitions.

After five minutes of tossing and turning, she decided not to make me work for it. "Got anything warm?" She cracked a helpless smile. "Down in the kitchen. I mean."

"Real cocoa. Loaded with crap that's bad for you. Not from an envelope. Topped with marshmallows, also real, packed with whatever carcinogens the cocoa doesn't have."

"Sounds luscious. Bring a whole pot."

"You can help."

"No. I want to watch the storm." Water pelted the glass. Now and then lightning would suggest how turbulent the ocean had gotten, and I thought of firing up my beacon. Perhaps there was a seafarer out there who was as romantic about boats as I was about lighthouses, and he'd gotten caught in the squall without the latest in hightech directional doodads.

I did it. Then I dusted off an old TV tray for use as a serving platter, and brought the cocoa pot and accoutrements up the narrow stairs, clanking and rattling all the way.

My carbon-arc beam scanned the surface of the water in long, lazy turns. She was facing her diaphanous reflection in the glass, looking through her own image into the dark void beyond.

I had pulled on canvas pants to make the kitchen run, but Tasha was still perfectly naked and nakedly perfect, a siren contemplating shipwrecks. She drifted back from the window. I pitied my imaginary seafarer, stuck out in the cold, away from the warmth of her.

"You know those natives in Africa?" she asked as I served. "The ones who wouldn't let missionaries take their pictures because they thought the camera would trap their souls?"

"It's a common belief. West Indians still hold to the voodoo value of snapshots. *Mucho* mojo. Even bad snapshots." I couldn't help that last remark. What a pro I am.

"You remember April McClanahan?" She spoke toward the sea. To my reflection.

"You mean Crystal Climax, right?"

She nodded. "Also of wide renown as Cherry Whipp."

All three were a lady with whom Tasha had shared a garret during her flirtation with the hardcore film industry in the early 1970s. Don't swallow the negative hype for a second—every woman who is anyone in film or modeling has made similar contacts. Tasha never moved beyond a couple of relatively innocuous missionary-position features, respectable porn for slumming middle-class couples; a one-week run at the Pussycat Theatre, max. April, on the other hand, moved into the porn mainstream—Hustler covers, videocassette toplines, "Fully Erect" notices in the film ratings. And no, she didn't get strangled or blow her brains all over a motel room with a Saturday Night Special. Last I heard, she was doing TV commercials for bleach and fabric softener as "Valerie Winston," sort of a Marilyn Chambers in reverse.

"April once told me she'd figured out, with a calculator, that she was responsible for more orgasms in one year than anybody else," Tasha said, holding the big porcelain mug with both hands to warm her palms. "She averaged out how many movie houses were showing her films, how many times per day, multiplied by however-many guys she figured were getting their jollies in the audience per show. Plus whoever was doing likewise to her pictures in God knows how many stroke magazines. Or gratifying themselves to the sex advice column she did for *Leather Life*. I remember her looking at me and saying, 'Think of all the energy that must produce. All those orgasms were born because of me. *Me*.'"

"I'm sure there are legions of guys getting their jollies to your photos,

too," I said. "No doubt, somebody is out there yanking his crank to

Christie Brinkley's smile, right now."

"It's not the same thing. April was tough. She got something back." She sat on the bed facing me, tucking her legs beneath her. She reminded me of Edvard Eriksen's famous sculpture of the Little Mermaid, rendered not in bronze but shaped from milk-white moonstone, heated by living yellow electricity called down from a black sky, and warmed by warm Arctic eyes—the warmest blue there is in our world.

"You mean April didn't mind getting that porn-star rap laid on her—

literally?"

I could see the sadness in her being blotted away by acid bitterness. "The people in porn have it easier. The thuds out there in Bozo-land know in their tiny little hearts that porn stars fuck for jobs. Whereas cover girls or legit models who are rarely seen in the buff, or full-frontal, are suspect."

"You can't deny the public their imaginary intrigues."

"What it always boils down to is, 'Climb off it, bitch—who did you really blow to get that last Vogue cover?' They feed off you. They achieve gratification in a far dirtier way, by wanting you and resenting you at the same time. By hating your success enough to keep all the tabloids in business. It's a draining thing, all taking and no giving, like . . ."

"Psychic vampirism?" It was so easy for someone in her position to sense that her public loved her only in the way a tumor loves its host. But a blacker part of my mind tasted a subtle tang of revenge. She'd left me to go chase what she wanted . . . and when she'd finally sunk in her teeth, she'd gotten the flavor of bile and chalk and ashes. I suppose I should have been ashamed of myself for embracing that hateful satisfaction so readily. And from the hurt neutrality on her face, she might have been reading the thoughts in my head. She watched her cocoa instead of drinking it—always a bad sign.

Just as much as I never said no, I never apologized. Not for anything. After a cool silence, she said, "You're saying to yourself, 'She's got it made, for christsake. What right does she have to be dissatisfied with

anything?' Right?"

"Maybe a tiny bit, yeah." She let me take her hand regardless. She needed the contact. The missing ten years settled between us to fog the issue. I was resentful, yes. Did I want to help her? Same answer. When I guiltily tried to pull back my hand, she kept hold of it. It made me feel forgiven; absolved, almost.

"In science class, in eighth grade, they taught us that when you smell

something, your nose is actually drawing in tiny molecular bits of whatever it is you're smelling. Particles."

"Which means you clamped both hands over your mouth and nose whenever you passed a dog turd on the sidewalk after school, am I right?" My prescription for sticky emotional situations is rigid: Always—always joke your way out.

Her smile came and went. "The idea stuck in my head. If you smelled something long enough, it would run out of molecules and poof-it

wouldn't exist anymore."

"Uh-huh, if you stood around sniffing for a couple of eons." Fortunately, I'd forgotten most of the junk with which school had tried to clog my head. About hard science I knew squat, like math. But I did know that there were billions or trillions of molecules in any given object.

"My point is that each one of us only has so much to give." She cleared her throat, almost as though it hurt her, and pressed valiantly onward.

"What if you were to run out of pieces all of a sudden?"

"Happens all the time," I said airily. "That's what a nervous breakdown is. Entertainers who can't give their audiences an ounce more, collapse onstage. Corporate guys get physically ill and can't go near a meeting room. People exceed their operational limits . . . and you're in one of the most high-pressure professions there is."

"No." She was shaking her head to prevent me from clouding her train of thought. "I mean run out of pieces literally. Suppose every photo of me ever taken was an infinitesimal piece? Every magazine ad, every negative, every frame of motion picture film—another tiny molecule of me, stolen away to feed an audience that is never satiated. And when someone is fully consumed—vampirized—they move on, still hungry, to pick their next victim by making him or her a star. That's why they're called consumers."

I looked up from the muddy lees in my cup just in time to see the passing lighthouse beam blank the ghost of her reflection from the windowpanes. Just like her smile, it came and went.

Her voice had downshifted into the husky and quavering register of confession. Now I was really uncomfortable. "I know there are celebrities who've had their picture taken two million more times than I have. But maybe they can afford it." She stretched across the bed to place her head on my thigh and hug my waist, connecting herself. "Maybe some of us don't have so many pieces . . ."

I held her while the storm rallied for a renewed assault. My modest but brave beam of lamplight chopped through it. She did not grimace,

or redden, or sob; her tears just began spilling out, coursing down in perfect wet lines to darken my pantleg.

Did I want to help her?

She feared that consumers wanted so much of her that pretty soon there would be nothing left to consume. And Claudia Katz no longer existed, except in my head. I'd fallen in love with her, become addicted to her . . . and now she was clinging to me because Tasha Vode was almost used up, and after that, if there was no Claudia, there was nothing. She had not brought her exhaustion home to my stoop to prove she could still jerk my leash after ten years. She had done it because the so-called friends who had gorged themselves on her personality were now nodding and clucking about celebrity lifestyles and answering their machines and juggling in new appointments to replace her as the undertow dragged her away to oblivion.

I stroked her hair until it was all out of her face. The tears dried while the seastorm churned. She snoozed, curled up, her face at peace, and I gently disengaged. Then, with a zealot's devotion toward proving her fears were all in her imagination, I went downstairs to load up one of my Nikons.

I asked her how she felt the next morning. When she said terrific, I spilled the beans.

"You what—?"

"I repeat for clarity: I took pictures of you while you were asleep. Over a hundred exposures of you wound up in my dark blue sheets, sleeping through a gale. And guess what—you're still among the living this morning." I refilled her coffee cup and used my tongs to pluck croissants out of the warmer.

She cut loose a capacious sigh, but put her protests on hold. "Don't do that again. Or you'll lose me."

I wasn't sure whether she meant she'd fade to nothingness on the spot, or stomp out if I defied her superstitions a second time. "You slept like a stone, love. Barely changed position all night." My ego was begging to be told that our mattress gymnastics had put her under, but when I saw the care she took to lift her coffee cup with both hands, I knew better.

"Look at this shit," she said with disgust. "I can barely hold up my head, let alone my coffee. I'm slouching. Models aren't supposed to *slouch*, for christsake." She forced her sitting posture straight and smiled weakly. Her voice was a bit hoarse this morning, almost clogged.

"Hey, lady—slouch away." Worry stabbed at my insides while I tried to sound expansive and confident. "Do what thou wilt. Sleep all day if

that's your pleasure. Just wait till you discover what I've learned to cook in the last ten years. Real salads. Stuff you have to sauté. Food with wine in it. I can artistically dish up all the squares you require. Loaf on the beach; read my library. I have said it; it is good." I watched a glint of happiness try to burn away the caution in her eyes. She did so want to believe me. "And no more photographs. Promise. Anybody who tries has gotta shoot through yours truly."

She brightened at that. I'd gotten the reaction I wanted from her. It was the challenge-and-reward game. And goddamned if that tiny aciddrop of doubt didn't settle into my brain, sizzling—what if what if what

if.

What if I was playing it safe because she might be right?

"I don't want to see those pictures," she said. "Don't even develop them."

"I'll toss 'em in the woodstove right now, if that's what you'd like." I'd made my point.

She gave a theatrical shudder. "Don't burn them. That's too much like a horror story I read once. I might shuffle off the coil along with my own pictures."

The rolls of film were lined up on my miscellaneous shelf downstairs, in the darkroom, the room with the red lightbulbs. Expose the film to anything but that mellow, crimson glow and it blanked into silver nitrate nothingness. The rolls could stay down there, sealed into their little black plastic vials. Forever, if that's what she wanted.

She kept watch on the sea while we destroyed our Continental breakfast. "I thought maybe we could brave the overcast later, and drive down past Point Pitt for dinner," I said. "Steaks, salads and a bottle or two of Cabernet. If anybody asks whether you're Tasha Vode, just blink and say, 'Who?'"

The life had surged back in to her expression. "Maybe. Or maybe seafood. But I want you to do something for me, first."

"Your wish . . . "

"Don't you have any work to do today?"

Who were we kidding? I think we both knew I'd do almost anything she asked. "Nothing that can't wait."

"Then carry me back up to the bedroom."

My narrow little stairway was a tight spot, but we negotiated it successfully after a mild bump or two. Our robes got in the way, so we left them crumpled on the stairs about halfway up.

Her need for contact was vital.

Outside the bedroom window, it got dark. I did not notice. All I could see was her.

Her eyes were capable of a breath-catching syllabary of expressions, and I felt my own eyes become lenses, trying to record them. I stopped being friend or lover to be a camera, to try and trap what it was about her that made strangers hear those jungle drums. There were thousands, maybe millions of men out there who fantasized being inside her the way I was, who played my role and spoke my half of the dialogue whenever they passed a newsstand. Their wanting never ceased.

Her eyes told me she knew what I was up to. They did not approve.

Hers was one of the few callings that made you a veteran before puberty was left behind. If you lucked out, it could make you wealthy while still a child; if you weren't so lucky it could leave you a burned out has-been before you graduated high school. The attrition rate was worse than that for professional athletes, who could at least fall back on commercials for razors and lite beer when middle age called them out. But she did not seem the sort of human being who could relish the living death of celebrity game shows. Staying beautiful had been an unending war; each touchup a skirmish that stole away another irreclaimable chunk of time. Doing it for ten years, and staying the best, had been draining. Her outside was being used up. Her hipbones felt like flint arrowheads beneath soft tissue paper.

Her hand slid down and felt the cingulum cinched drawstring tight above my balls. Comprehension dawned in her eyes, followed by that strange tolerance of hers for my various idiocies. I can't relate the exact sequence (to come was, for me, a necessary agony by now), but I was almost certain that her rapidfire contractions began the instant she slipped the knot of the cingulum. Unbound, I offloaded lavishly. Her fingers whitened with pressure on my shoulders, then relaxed, reddening with blood. I watched the pupils of those warm Arctic eyes expand hotly in the dimness as she took what was mine. Until that moment, her own orgasms had seemed insubstantial somehow. Disconnected from her. Spasms of her equipment more than sparky showers in her brain. Her breath had barely raised condensation on my skin. Now she came into focus, filled, flushed, and radiating heat.

After holding me for a lapse of time impossible to measure, she said, "Don't try to impress. You're not performing with a capital *P*." Her eyes saw that I had been intimidated by the imagined skills of her past decade of lovers, and thus the girdle cord trick. Stupid. "Don't you see? You're the only one who ever gave anything back."

"Tasha, you don't really believe that—"

"Try Claudia." It was not a command but a gentle urging. But it, too, was vital. "You're the only one who can give me back some of myself; replace what the others have taken. Give me more." Her reverent tone bordered on love—the word I could rarely force myself to speak, even frivolously.

Who better to give her back some of herself? I was a goddamn repository of her identity. With other women I had never bothered worrying, and so had never been befuddled as I was now. I'd made love to Claudia, not the exterior self that the rest of the world was busy eating. And now she was steering.

I gave her back to herself; her eyes said so, her voice said so, and I tried to hush the voice in my head that said I was not being compensated for this drain. I tried to ignore the numberless black canisters of film that beckoned me from the room with the red light. And later, past midnight, when the storm thundered in, I carefully took twice what I had given her. No matter how much we have, as Nicole the waitress would say, we always want more.

"Skull full of sparrow shit," she said the following day, as we bumped knees and elbows trying to dress for dinner. "Gorgeous but ditzy. Vacuous. Vapid. Pampered. Transient values. A real spoiled-rotten—"

"I think I get the stereotype," I said. "You're just not stupid enough to be happy as a model anymore, right?"

"Ex-model." She watched the sea bounce back the glare of late afternoon. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"What I believe scares the crap out of me." I tried to veneer what I said with good humor, to defang my fears. "I believe, for example, that you might be a ghost. And ghosts never stay."

She waggled her eyebrows. "I could haunt your lighthouse. Or maybe I'm just your wish-fulfillment."

"Don't laugh. I've often thought that I'm not really earning a living as a photographer." Merely speaking that last word caused the slightest hesitation in the natural flow of her movements; she was *that* sensitized to it. "I'm not really sleeping with Tas... uh, Claudia Katz." She caught that slip, too, but forgave it. "Actually, I'm really a dirtbag litter basket picker up in the Mission. And all of this is a hallucinatory fantasy I invented while loitering near a magazine rack with Tasha Vode's picture at hand, hm?"

"Ack," she said with mock horror. "You're one of *them*. The pod-folk." "Are we gone, or what?"

She stepped back from the mirror, inside of a bulky, deep-blue ski sweater with maroon patterning, soft boots of gray suede, and black slacks so tight they made my groin ache. Her eyes filled up with me, and they were the aquamarine color of the sunlit ocean outside. "We're gone," she said, and led the way down the stairs.

I followed, thinking that when she left me again I'd at least have those

hundreds of photographs of her in my bed. Ghosts never stay.

Outside there was a son of a bitch, an asshole.

The son of a bitch was crouched in ambush right next to my front door. His partner, the asshole, was leaning on my XLS, getting cloudy finger-prints all over the front fender. I had backed out the front door, to lock it, and heard his voice talking, before anything else.

"Miss Vode, do you have any comment on your abrupt—

Tasha—Claudia—started to scream.

I turned as she recoiled and grabbed my hand. I saw the asshole. Any humanity he might have claimed was obliterated by the vision of a huge, green check for an exclusive article that lit up his eyes. A pod-man. Someone had recognized us in the restaurant last night, and sent him to ambush us in the name of the public's right to know. He brandished a huge audio microphone at us as though it was a scepter of power. It had a red foam windscreen and looked like a phallic lollipop.

Her scream sliced his question neatly off. She scrambled backward, hair flying, trying to interpose me between herself and the enemy, clawing at her head, crushing her eyes shut and *screaming*. That sound

filled my veins with liquid nitrogen.

The son of a bitch was behind us. From the instant we had stepped into the sunlight, he'd had us nailed in his viewfinder. The video rig into which he was harnessed ground silently away; the red bubble light over the lens hood was on.

And Tasha screamed.

Maybe she jerked her hand away, maybe I let it go, but her grip went foggy in mine as I launched myself at the cameraman, eating up the distance between us like a barracuda. Only once in my whole life had I ever hit a man in anger, and now I doubled my own personal best by delivering a roundhouse punch right into the black glass maw of his lens, filling his face up with his own camera, breaking his nose, two front teeth, and the three middle fingers of my fist. He faded to black and went down like a medieval knight trapped by the weight of his own armor. I swarmed over him and used my good hand to rip out his electronic heart, wresting away portacam, tape and all. Cables shredded like torn ligaments and shiny tape viscera trailed as I heaved it, spinning, over the pier rail and into a sea the same color as Tasha's eyes. The red light expired.

Her scream . . . wasn't. There was a sound of pain as translucent as rice paper, thin as a flake of mica, drowned out by the roar of water meeting beach.

By the time I cranked my head around—two dozen slow-motion shots, easy—neither of her was there anymore. I thought I saw her eyes, in Arctic-cold afterburn, winking out last.

"Did you see—?"

"You're trespassing!" bellowed Dickie Barnhardt, wobbling toward the asshole with his side-to-side Popeye gait, pressed flat and pissed off. The asshole's face was flash-frozen into a bloodless bas-relief of shock and disbelief. His mouth hung slack, showing off a lot of expensive fillings. His mike lay forgotten at his feet.

"Did you see . . . did . . . she just . . . "

Dickie bounced his ashwood walking stick off the asshole's forehead, and he joined his fallen mike in a boneless tumble on the planks of the pier. Dickie's face was alight with a bizarre expression that said it had been quite a while since he'd found a good excuse to raise physical mayhem, and he was proud of his forthright defense of tenant and territory. "You okay?" he said, squinting at me and spying the fresh blood on my hand.

"Dickie, did you see Tasha?" My own voice was switching in and out. My throat constricted. My unbroken hand closed on empty space. Too late.

He grinned a seaworthy grin at me and nudged the unconscious idiot at his feet, who remained slack. "Who's Tasha, son?"

I drink my coffee left-handed, and the cast mummifying my right hand gives me something to stare at contemplatively.

I think most often of that videotape, decomposing down there among the sand sharks and the jellyfish that sometimes bob to the surface near Dickie's pier. I think that the tiny bit of footage recorded by that poor, busted-up son-of-a-bitch cameraman would not have mattered one damn, if I hadn't shot so much film of Tasha to prove she had nothing to fear. So many pieces. I pushed her right to the edge, cannibalizing her in the name of love.

The black plastic cans of film are still on the shelf down in my darkroom, lined up like inquisitors already convinced of my guilt. The thought of dunking that film in developer makes me want to stick a gun in my ear and pull the trigger, twice if I had the time.

Then I consider another way out, and wonder how long it would take me to catch up with her; how many pieces I have. I never cried much before. Now the tears unload at the least provocation. It's sloppy, and messy, and unprofessional, and I hate it. It makes Nicole stare at me the way the street bum did, like I've tipped over into psycholand.

When she makes her rounds to fill my cup, she watches me. The wariness in her eyes is new. She sees my notice dip from her eyes to her sumptuous chest and back, in a guilty but unalterable ritual. I force a smile for her, gamely, but it stays pasted across my face a beat too long, insisting too urgently that everything is okay. She doesn't ask. I wave my unbroken hand over my cup to indicate no more, and Nicole tilts her head with a queer, new expression—as though this white boy is trying to trick her. But she knows better. She always has.



# In the Hour Before Dawn

## **Brad Strickland**

Born in New Holland, Georgia on October 27, 1947, Brad Strickland says that he's just a "small-town kid still trying to make good." Strickland holds a Ph.D. from the University of Georgia, and he and his family now reside in Oakwood, Georgia; he teaches English at both high school and college levels.

Brad Strickland's short fiction has appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction, Amazing, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, and Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. His first novel, To Stand Beneath the Sun (science fiction) was published last year by Signet; the same publisher brought out his fantasy novel, Moon Dreams, this year. Strickland's next book will be "a horror novel set in North (NOT 'Northern.' Only Yankees say 'Northern') Georgia. This is called ShadowShow and marks a return to sorts—my first story was a horror piece set in North Georgia."

CHARLES WAS unmistakably in the country of dreams. He stood alone in a shallow, bowl-like valley, scooped from fine-grained, silvery sand. Here and there boulders interrupted the gently curved surface, boulders that were themselves smooth and golden, like polished statues of sleeping elephants.

Charles' own body seemed indistinct. He could not say whether he wore a suit, shirt and trousers, or nothing at all. Otherwise his senses registered nothing unusual. The air smelled like air. When he stooped and thrust his hand into the sand, it was silky and cool to the touch. It tasted of nothing. Standing with head bowed, as if intent on prayer or thought, he heard no sound. And as for vision, except for the bowl-shaped valley and the boulders, all he could see was the sky, doomed like a lid badly put into place over him, a luminescent mother-of-pearl gray all around the horizon's edge, darkening in the concavity overhead to a red-purple, reminding him of the color of a bruise.

I am dreaming, Charles thought suddenly. How strange, to be dreaming, and to be aware that he was dreaming! As strange, he suspected, as

to be fully awake and to be aware that one was fully awake. The notion struck him as in some sense profound, and to himself, he thought, That is something I must remember. I must hold on to that idea for the time when I awake.

"Excuse me." In that silence the voice boomed loud as an earthquake, startling as summer thunder. "Excuse me. I am dreaming of you, I know, but I don't know you."

Charles turned. The speaker had just come from behind one of the boulders. He was a man about Charles' age—thirty-one—but shorter, much darker of hair and eye, and more muscular. Oddly, Charles had less trouble seeing the stranger than he had seeing himself: the man wore tan trousers, no shirt, no shoes. Heat glistened in the perspiration underlying the dark mat of chest hair. "That's odd," Charles said. "I am dreaming of you, and you believe yourself to be dreaming of me. How very odd."

The other man had a one-sided smile, a quarter inch higher on the left side of his face than his right. "You're wrong. *I* am dreaming you. Don't confuse yourself by imagining you really exist."

Charles laughed. "Certainly I exist. I have a name and address. I am Charles Dayton, and I live on Revere Drive in Somerville. My students at the university would be very surprised to find that I don't exist. Maybe not unhappy, but definitely surprised."

The stranger shook his head, still smiling his one-sided smile. "I don't know how I came to dream of a teacher from Somerville. I don't even know where that is—if there is such a place. But I know I exist. I'm Paul Dupont. I'm a trial lawyer. And I live in Sierra Heights, outside of Santa Rosita, with my wife."

"I've got a wife, too," Charles blurted, feeling obscurely as if the other had scored a point. "Now look, I never dream of strangers. Always people I know, or sort of odd conglomerations of people I know. I don't know you—and I don't believe there's even a place named Santa Rosita."

Paul looked annoyed. "Come to think of it, I've never dreamed up a stranger, either. Not one with a phony name and address, anyhow. But there's always a first time."

"What am I wearing?" Charles asked.

Paul frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"Come on," Charles said. "You call yourself a lawyer—you're supposed to have some intelligence, aren't you? Just tell me what you see. How am I dressed?"

"You're barefoot. You have on some white shorts; tennis shorts, I guess. That's all. So what?"

"What are you wearing?" Charles asked.

Paul frowned down at himself. "Something's keeping me from seeing

it. I guess I haven't dreamed that part yet."

"You're not dreaming at all. Get it through your head that you're the imaginary one. I am real, and my home and family are real. There's no Paul, no wife, no Santa Rosita."

"Nonsense!" The lawyer paced back and forth on the silver sand, his head down. Then he paused and gazed sidelong at Charles. "Is it not true that you never know when you're dreaming?"

"No. I know I'm dreaming now."

"Have you ever done it before? Known you were dreaming while you were dreaming?"

"Not that I remember."

Paul turned to face Charles. "Then you would say that it's unusual for you to be aware of your own dreams, while you are actually dreaming?"

"Very unusual," Charles agreed, amused at how much like a real lawyer his imaginary lawyer sounded.

Paul's voice rang with triumph: "Then that indicates, wouldn't you say, that the probability is that you are not dreaming now—because you cannot dream, you are just a figment of my imagination?"

"That's idiotic. Look, Paul whatever-your-name-is, you may think you're real, but that's only because I dreamed you so well. I gave you the

illusion of reality so strongly that you believe in yourself."

Paul wouldn't give up. "But isn't it at least as likely that I have given you the illusion of reality? That I have dreamed you so well that you believe you exist, when in fact you do not?" He stooped suddenly, snatched a handful of sand, and flung it at Charles.

Charles spun, lifting his arm to ward off the stinging particles. They hit forearm, shoulder, neck, but missed his eyes. "Hey!"

"Funny," Paul said. "I thought it'd go right through you. Maybe I ought to try a rock."

Charles rubbed a hand across his face and held up a dripping palm. "Look at that. I suppose you think that isn't real?"

"Imaginary sweat," scoffed Paul. "You fool. Even if you were right, you'd still be dreaming it, so even then it wouldn't be real. And if I dreamed of something as unpleasant as you, I could certainly dream of sweat."

Charles stalked over to Paul. He came so close he could feel the exhaled breath of the other man stirring the air, could hear the faint rush of it through the other's nose and sinuses. "See if this seems real," he said, and hit the other man in the mouth.

Paul reeled back, blood spurting from a cut lip. He shook his head, scattering drops that made pear-shaped red spatters on the sand, and then lunged head down at Charles. The two rolled over in the silver sand, and though Charles strained muscle and sinew, it was no use. They were too evenly matched and too inexpert for either to get a temporary advantage.

Charles' breath burned hot and harsh when at last both of them rested on hands and knees, a yard away from each other. Both were panting, sweating, and bleeding. "This is nonsense," Paul said. "Soon I'll wake up, and you will be gone."

"I agree," Charles said. "Except I'll wake up, and you will vanish."

"Then all we have to do is wait." Paul pushed up, grimacing as if weary and in pain. He backed away and sat on one of the golden boulders. His shoulders bowed and his chest heaved.

Charles sank onto another stone. He felt every ache in his muscles, every rip in his skin, every drop of sweat that crawled like a warm little snail down his face. I am real, Charles thought. I will wake up, and it will all be as it has been before. He will vanish. He looked into the other's haunted eyes. He really believes that he is the dreamer, Charles thought. He really does—just as I do. Panic fluttered light butterfly wings in his belly. What if he is right? Charles wondered for the first time.

Almost simultaneously, he read the exact thought in the other's eyes. Exhausted, helpless beneath the bruised dome of the dreamed sky, the two sat staring at one another, hating one another, and waiting out the hour before dawn.

Waking came quickly, with an outrush of breath. He looked up at the familiar white ceiling. From the corner of his left eye, he could see the night table where he had carelessly thrown his trousers last night. Through the open bedroom door came kitchen sounds and smells. Meg making Monday's breakfast for the two of them.

He had not wept in ages, but he did now. He closed his eyes. "God," he said. "What did I do to deserve that?" Then he laughed silently, his chest bucking beneath the sheet.

"You awake?" Meg called.

He did not trust himself to speak.

After a moment she called again, closer, louder, "Honey, wake up. Time to get going. You have to be in court at nine."

He frowned. "Court? What the hell do you mean?"

A strange woman stood in the doorway. "Paul, get up. What's got into you this morning?"

Open-mouthed, she backed into the hallway as the man in the bed held out his dark-skinned arms, studied his compact hands, and started to scream.



## Necros

### Brian Lumley

Brian Lumley is another stalwart from the early volumes of The Year's Best Horror Stories who returns to the series after too long an absence. Chalk it up to a recent series of successful horror novels and an excursion into heroic fantasy which have reduced his output of horror stories. Born in Horden, Durham on December 2, 1937, Lumley initially made his mark as an indefatigable writer of Lovecraftian horror fiction with such books as The Caller of the Black, The Burrowers Beneath, Beneath the Moors, The Transition of Titus Crow, and The Horror at Oakdene. It has been pointed out that Lumley was born some nine months after Lovecraft's death.

Trained as a sawyer, Brian Lumley joined the army at age 21 and served 22 years in Berlin and Cyprus among other postings. Since retiring from the army six years ago, he has devoted himself full time to writing. Two years ago he moved to a Devon fishing village, where he has recently finished Necroscope II, a horror novel that makes about his twenty-fifty book. Lumley is an avid swimmer and spear-fisher and is fond of seafood in all its most wriggly forms. So much for the Lovecraft connection.

T

AN OLD WOMAN in a faded blue frock and black head-square paused in the shade of Mario's awning and nodded good-day. She smiled a gap-toothed smile. A bulky, slouch-shouldered youth in jeans and a stained yellow T-shirt—a slope-headed idiot, probably her grandson—held her hand, drooling vacantly and fidgeting beside her.

Mario nodded good-naturedly, smiled, wrapped a piece of stale *fucaccia* in greaseproof paper and came from behind the bar to give it to her. She clasped his hand, thanked him, turned to go.

Her attention was suddenly arrested by something she saw across the road. She started, cursed vividly, harshly, and despite my meager knowledge of Italian I picked up something of the hatred in her tone. "Devil's

spawn!" She said it again. "Dog! Swine!" She pointed a shaking hand and finger, said yet again: "Devil's spawn!" before making the two-fingered, double-handed stabbing sign with which the Italians ward off evil. To do this it was first necessary that she drop her salted bread, which the idiot youth at once snatched up.

Then, still mouthing low, guttural imprecations, dragging the shuffling, fucaccia-munching cretin behind her, she hurried off along the street and disappeared into an alley. One word that she had repeated over and over again stayed in my mind: "Necros! Necros!" Though the word was new to me, I took it for a curse-word. The accent she put on it had been poisonous.

I sipped at my Negroni, remained seated at the small circular table beneath Mario's awning and stared at the object of the crone's distaste. It was a motorcar, a white convertible Rover and this year's model, inching slowly forward in a stream of holiday traffic. And it was worth looking at if only for the girl behind the wheel. The little man in the floppy white hat beside her—well, he was something else, too. But *she* was—just something else.

I caught a glimpse, sufficient to feel stunned. That was good. I had thought it was something I could never know again: that feeling a man gets looking at a beautiful girl. Not after Linda. And yet—

She was young, say twenty-four or -five, some three or four years my junior. She sat tall at the wheel, slim, raven-haired under a white, wide-brimmed summer hat which just missed matching that of her companion, with a complexion cool and creamy enough to pour over peaches. I stood up—yes, to get a better look—and right then the traffic came to a momentary standstill. At that moment, too, she turned her head and looked at me. And if the profile had stunned me... well, the full frontal knocked me dead. The girl was simply, classically, beautiful.

Her eyes were of a dark green but very bright, slightly tilted and perfectly oval under straight, thin brows. Her cheeks were high, her lips a red Cupid's bow, her neck long and white against the glowing yellow of her blouse. And her smile—

—Oh, yes, she smiled.

Her glance, at first cool, became curious in a moment, then a little angry, until finally, seeing my confusion—that smile. And as she turned her attention back to the road and followed the stream of traffic out of sight, I saw a blush of color spreading on the creamy surface of her cheek. Then she was gone.

Then, too, I remembered the little man who sat beside her. Actually, I hadn't seen a great deal of him, but what I had seen had given me the

creeps. He too had turned his head to stare at me, leaving in my mind's eye an impression of beady bird eyes, sharp and intelligent in the shade of his hat. He had stared at me for only a moment, and then his head had slowly turned away; but even when he no longer looked at me, when he stared straight ahead, it seemed to me I could feel those raven's eyes upon me, and that a query had been written in them.

I believed I could understand it, that look. He must have seen a good many young men staring at him like that—or rather, at the girl. His look had been a threat in answer to my threat—and because he was practiced

in it I had certainly felt the more threatened!

I turned to Mario, whose English was excellent. "She has something against expensive cars and rich people?"

"Who?" he busied himself behind his bar.

"The old lady, the woman with the idiot boy."

"Ah!" he nodded. "Mainly against the little man, I suspect."

"Oh?"

"You want another Negroni?"

"OK—and one for yourself—but tell me about this other thing, won't you?"

"If you like—but you're only interested in the girl, yes?" He grinned.

I shrugged. "She's a good-looker . . . "

"Yes, I saw her." Now he shrugged. "That other thing—just old myths and legends, that's all. Like your English Dracula, eh?"

"Transylvanian Dracula," I corrected him.

"Whatever you like. And Necros: that's the name of the spook, see?"

"Necros is the name of a vampire?"

"A spook, yes."

"And this is a real legend? I mean, historical?"

He made a fifty-fifty face, his hands palms-up. "Local, I guess. Ligurian. I remember it from when I was a kid. If I was bad, old Necros sure to come and get me. Today," again the shrug, "it's forgotten."

"Like the bogeyman," I nodded.

"Eh?"

"Nothing. But why did the old girl go on like that?"

Again he shrugged. "Maybe she think that old man Necros, eh? She crazy, you know? Very backward. The whole family."

I was still interested. "How does the legend go?"

"The spook takes the life out of you. You grow old, spook grows young. It's a bargain you make: he gives you something you want, gets what he wants. What he wants is your youth. Except he uses it up quick and needs more. All the time, more youth."

"What kind of bargain is that?" I asked. "What does the victim get out of it?"

"Gets what he wants," said Mario, his brown face cracking into another grin. "In your case the girl, eh? If the little man was Necros . . ."

He got on with his work and I sat there sipping my Negroni. End of conversation. I thought no more about it—until later.

Π

Of course, I should have been in Italy with Linda, but . . . I had kept her "Dear John" for a fortnight before shredding it, getting mindlessly drunk and starting in on the process of forgetting. That had been a month ago. The holiday had already been booked and I wasn't about to miss out on my trip to the sun. And so I had come out on my own. It was hot, the swimming was good, life was easy and the food superb. With just two days left to enjoy it, I told myself it hadn't been bad. But it would have been better with Linda.

Linda... She was still on my mind—at the back of it, anyway—later that night as I sat in the bar of my hotel beside an open bougainvillaea-decked balcony that looked down on the bay and the seafront lights of the town. And maybe she wasn't all that far back in my mind—maybe she was right there in front—or else I was just plain daydreaming. Whichever, I missed the entry of the lovely lady and her shriveled companion, failing to spot and recognize them until they were taking their seats at a little table just the other side of the balcony's sweep.

This was the closest I'd been to her, and—

Well, first impressions hadn't lied. This girl was beautiful. She didn't look quite as young as she'd first seemed—my own age, maybe—but beautiful she certainly was. And the old boy? He must be, could only be, her father. Maybe it sounds like I was a little naive, but with her looks this lady really didn't need an old man. And if she did need one it didn't have to be *this* one.

By now she'd seen me and my fascination with her must have been obvious. Seeing it she smiled and blushed at one and the same time, and for a moment turned her eyes away—but only for a moment. Fortunately her companion had his back to me or he must have known my feelings at once; for as she looked at me again—fully upon me this time—I could have sworn I read an invitation in her eyes, and in that same moment any bitter vows I may have made melted away completely and were forgotten. God, please let him be her father!

For an hour I sat there, drinking a few too many cocktails, eating olives

and potato crisps from little bowls on the bar, keeping my eyes off the girl as best I could, if only for common decency's sake. But . . . all the time I worried frantically at the problem of how to introduce myself, and as the minutes ticked by it seemed to me that the most obvious way must also be the best.

But how obvious would it be to the old boy?

And the damnable thing was that the girl hadn't given me another glance since her original—invitation? Had I mistaken that look of hers?—or was she simply waiting for me to make the first move? God, let him be her father!

She was sipping Martinis, slowly; he drank a rich red wine, in some quantity. I asked a waiter to replenish their glasses and charge it to me. I had already spoken to the bar steward, a swarthy, friendly little chap from the South called Francesco, but he hadn't been able to enlighten me. The pair were not resident, he assured me; but being resident myself I was already pretty sure of that.

Anyway, my drinks were delivered to their table; they looked surprised; the girl put on a perfectly innocent expression, questioned the waiter, nodded in my direction and gave me a cautious smile, and the old boy turned his head to stare at me. I found myself smiling in return but avoiding his eyes, which were like coals now, sunken deep in his brown-wrinkled face. Time seemed suspended—if only for a second—then the girl spoke again to the waiter and he came across to me.

"Mr. Collins, sir, the gentleman and the young lady thank you and request that you join them." Which was everything I had dared hope for—for the moment.

Standing up I suddenly realized how much I'd had to drink. I willed sobriety on myself and walked across to their table. They didn't stand up but the little chap said, "Please sit." His voice was a rustle of dried grass. The waiter was behind me with a chair. I sat.

"Peter Collins," I said. "How do you do, Mr-er?-"

"Karpethes," he answered. "Nichos Karpethes. And this is my wife, Adrienne." Neither one of them had made the effort to extend their hands, but that didn't dismay me. Only the fact that they were married dismayed me. He must be very, very rich, this Nichos Karpethes.

"I'm delighted you invited me over," I said, forcing a smile, "but I see that I was mistaken. You see, I thought I heard you speaking English, and I—"

"Thought we were English?" she finished it for me. "A natural error. Originally I am Armenian, Nichos is Greek, of course. We do not speak

each other's tongue, but we do both speak English. Are you staying here, Mr. Collins?"

"Er, yes—for one more day and night. Then—" I shrugged and put on a sad look, "—back to England, I'm afraid."

"Afraid?" the old boy whispered. "There is something to fear in a return to your homeland?"

"Just an expression," I answered. "I meant I'm afraid that my holiday is coming to an end."

He smiled. It was a strange, wistful sort of smile, wrinkling his face up like a little walnut. "But your friends will be glad to see you again. Your loved ones—?"

I shook my head. "Only a handful of friends—none of them really close—and no loved ones. I'm a loner, Mr. Karpethes."

"A loner?" His eyes glowed deep in their sockets and his hands began to tremble where they gripped the table's rim. "Mr. Collins, you don't—"

"We understand," she cut him off. "For although we are together, we too, in our way, are loners. Money has made Nichos lonely, you see? Also, he is not a well man, and time is short. He will not waste what time he has on frivolous friendships. As for myself—people do not understand our being together, Nichos and I. They pry, and I withdraw. And so I too am a loner."

There was no accusation in her voice, but still I felt obliged to say: "I certainly didn't intend to pry, Mrs.—"

"Adrienne," she smiled. "Please. No, of course you didn't. I would not want you to think we thought that of you. Anyway I will *tell* you why we are together, and then it will be put aside."

Her husband coughed, seemed to choke, struggled to his feet. I stood up and took his arm. He at once shook me off—with some distaste, I thought—but Adrienne had already signaled to a waiter. "Assist Mr. Karpethes to the gentleman's room," she quickly instructed in very good Italian. "And please help him back to the table when he has recovered."

As he went Karpethes gesticulated, probably tried to say something to me by way of an apology, choked again and reeled as he allowed the waiter to help him from the room.

"I'm . . . sorry," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"He has attacks." She was cool. "Do not concern yourself. I am used to it."

We sat in silence for a moment. Finally I began. "You were going to tell me—"

"Ah, yes! I had forgotten. It is a symbiosis."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I need the good life he can give me, and he needs... my youth? We supply each other's needs." And so, in a way, the old woman with the idiot boy hadn't been wrong after all. A sort of bargain had indeed been struck. Between Karpethes and his wife. As that thought crossed my mind I felt the short hairs at the back of my neck stiffen for a moment. Gooseflesh crawled on my arms. After all, "Nichos" was pretty close to "Necros," and now this youth thing again. Coincidence, of course. And after all, aren't all relationships bargains of sorts? Bargains struck for better or for worse.

"But for how long?" I asked. "I mean, how long will it work for you?" She shrugged. "I have been provided for. And he will have me all the days of his life."

I coughed, cleared my throat, gave a strained, self-conscious laugh. "And here's me, the non-pryer!"

"No, not at all, I wanted you to know."

"Well," I shrugged, "—but it's been a pretty deep first conversation." "First? Did you believe that buying me a drink would entitle you to more than one conversation?"

I almost winced. "Actually, I—"

But then she smiled and my world lit up. "You did not need to buy the drinks," she said. "There would have been some other way."

I looked at her inquiringly. "Some other way to—?"

"To find out if we were English or not."

"Oh!"

"Here comes Nichos now," she smiled across the room. "And we must be leaving. He's not well. Tell me, will you be on the beach tomorrow?"

"Oh—yes!" I answered after a moment's hesitation. "I like to swim."

"So do I. Perhaps we can swim out to the raft . . .?"

"I'd like that very much."

Her husband arrived back at the table under his own steam. He looked a little stronger now, not quite so shriveled somehow. He did not sit but gripped the back of his chair with parchment fingers, knuckles white where the skin stretched over old bones. "Mr. Collins," he rustled, "—Adrienne, I'm sorry..."

"There's really no need," I said, rising.

"We really must be going." She also stood. "No, you stay here, er, Peter? It's kind of you, but we can manage. Perhaps we'll see you on the beach." And she helped him to the door of the bar and through it without once looking back.

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They weren't staying at my hotel, had simply dropped in for a drink. That was understandable (though I would have preferred to think that she had been looking for me) for my hotel was middling tourist-class while theirs was something else. They were up on the hill, high on the crest of a Ligurian spur where a smaller, much more exclusive place nested in Mediterranean pines. A place whose lights spelled money when they shone up there at night, whose music came floating down from a tiny open-air disco like the laughter of high-living elementals of the air. If I was poetic it was because of her. I mean, that beautiful girl and that weary, wrinkled dried up walnut of an old man. If anything I was sorry for him. And yet in another way I wasn't.

And let's make no pretense about it—if I haven't said it already, let me say it right now—I wanted her. Moreover, there had been that about our conversation, her beach invitation, which told me that she was available.

The thought of it kept me awake half the night. . . .

I was on the beach at 9:00 a.m.—they didn't show until 11:00. When they did, and when she came out of her tiny changing cubicle—

There wasn't a male head on the beach that didn't turn at least twice. Who could blame them? That girl, in *that* costume, would have turned the head of a sphynx. But—there was something, some little nagging thing, different about her. A maturity beyond her years? She held herself like a model, a princess. But who was it for? Karpethes or me?

As for the old man: he was in a crumpled lightweight summer suit and sunshade hat as usual, but he seemed a bit more perky this morning. Unlike myself he'd doubtless had a good night's sleep. While his wife had been changing he had made his way unsteadily across the pebbly beach to my table and sun umbrella, taking the seat directly opposite me; and before his wife could appear he had opened with:

"Good morning, Mr. Collins."

"Good morning," I answered. "Please call me Peter."

"Peter, then," he nodded. He seemed out of breath, either from his stumbling walk over the beach or a certain urgency which I could detect in his movements, his hurried, almost rude "let's get down to it" manner.

"Peter, you said you would be here for one more day?"

"That's right," I answered, for the first time studying him closely where he sat like some strange garden gnome half in the shade of the beach umbrella. "This is my last day." He was a bundle of dry wood, a pallid prune, a small, umber scarecrow. And his voice, too, was of straw, or autumn leaves blown across a shady path. Only his eyes were alive. "And you said you have no family, few friends, no one to miss you back in England?"

Warning bells rang in my head. Maybe it wasn't so much urgency in him—which usually implies a goal or ambition still to be realized—but eagerness in that the goal was in sight. "That's correct. I am, was, a student doctor. When I get home I shall seek a position. Other than that there's nothing, no one, no ties."

He leaned forward, bird eyes very bright, claw hand reaching across the table, trembling, and—

Her shadow suddenly fell across us as she stood there in that costume. Karpethes jerked back in his chair. His face was working, strange emotions twisting the folds and wrinkles of his flesh into stranger contours. I could feel my heart thumping against my ribs . . . why I couldn't say. I calmed myself, looked up at her and smiled.

She stood with her back to the sun, which made a dark silhouette of her head and face. But in that blot of darkness her oval eyes were green jewels. "Shall we swim, Peter?"

She turned and ran down the beach, and of course I ran after her. She had a head start and beat me to the water, beat me to the raft, too. It wasn't until I hauled myself up beside her that I thought of Karpethes: how I hadn't even excused myself before plunging after her. But at least the water had cleared my head, bringing me completely awake and aware.

Aware of her incredible body where it stretched, almost touching mine, on the fiber deck of the gently bobbing raft.

I mentioned her husband's line of inquiry, gasping a little for breath as I recovered from the frantic exercise of our race. She, on the other hand, already seemed completely recovered. She carefully arranged her hair about her shoulders like a fan, to dry in the sunlight, before answering.

"Nichos is not really my husband," she finally said, not looking at me. "I am his companion, that's all. I could have told you last night, but . . . there was the chance that you really were curious only about our nationality. As for any veiled threats he might have issued: that is not unusual. He might not have the vitality of younger men, but jealousy is ageless."

"No," I answered, "he didn't threaten—not that I noticed. But jealousy? Knowing I have only one more day to spend here, what has he to fear from me?" Her shoulders twitched a little, a shrug. She turned her face to me, her lips inches away. Her eyelashes were like silken shutters over green pools, hiding whatever swam in the deeps. "I am young, Peter, and so are you. And you are very attractive, very . . . eager? Holiday romances are not uncommon."

My blood was on fire. "I have very little money," I said. "We are staying at different hotels. He already suspects me. It is impossible."

"What is?" she innocently asked, leaving me at a complete loss.

But then she laughed, tossed back her hair, already dry, dangled her hands and arms in the water. "Where there's a will . . ." she said.

"You know that I want you—" The words spilled out before I could control or change them.

"Oh, yes. And I want you." She said it so simply, and yet suddenly I felt seared. A moth brushing the magnet candle's flame.

I lifted my head, looked toward the beach. Across seventy-five yards of sparkling water the beach umbrellas looked very large and close. Karpethes sat in the shade just as I had last seen him, his face hidden in shadow. But I knew that he watched.

"You can do nothing here," she said, her voice languid—but I noticed now that she, too, seemed short of breath.

"This," I told her with a groan, "is going to kill me!"

She laughed, laughter that sparkled more than the sun on the sea. "I'm sorry," she sobered. "It's unfair of me to laugh. But—your case is not hopeless."

"Oh?"

"Tomorrow morning, early. Nichos has an appointment with a specialist in Genova. I am to drive him into the city tonight. We'll stay at a hotel overnight."

I groaned my misery. "Then my case is quite hopeless. I fly tomorrow."

"But if I sprained my wrist," she said, "and so could not drive . . . and if he went into Genova by taxi while I stayed behind with a headache—because of the pain from my wrist—" Like a flash she was on her feet, the raft tilting, her body diving, striking the water into a spray of diamonds.

Seconds for it all to sink in—and then I was following her, laboring through the water in her churning wake. And as she splashed from the sea, seeing her stumble, go to her hands and knees in Ligurian shingle—and the pained look on her face, the way she held her wrist as she came to her feet. As easy as that!

Karpethes, struggling to rise from his seat, stared at her with his mouth

agape. Her face screwed up now as I followed her up the beach. And Adrienne holding her "sprained" wrist and shaking it, her mouth forming an elongated "O." The sinuous motion of her body and limbs, mobile marble with dew of ocean clinging saltily. . . .

If the tiny man had said to me: "I am Necros. I want ten years of your life for one night with her," at that moment I might have sealed the bargain. Gladly. But legends are legends and he wasn't Necros, and he

didn't, and I didn't. After all, there was no need. . . .

#### IV

I suppose my greatest fear was that she might be "having me on," amusing herself at my expense. She was, of course, "safe" with me—insofar as I would be gone tomorrow and the "romance" forgotten, for her, anyway—and I could also see how she was starved for young companionship, a fact she had brought right out in the open from the word go.

But why me? Why should I be so lucky?

Attractive? Was I? I had never thought so. Perhaps it was because I was so safe: here today and gone tomorrow, with little or no chance of complications. Yes, that must be it. If she wasn't simply making a fool of me. She might be just a tease—

—But she wasn't.

At 8:30 that evening I was in the bar of my hotel—had been there for an hour, careful not to drink too much, unable to eat—when the waiter came to me and said there was a call for me on the reception telephone. I hurried out to reception where the clerk discreetly excused himself and left me alone.

"Peter?" Her voice was a deep well of promise. "He's gone. I've booked us a table, to dine at 9:00. Is that all right for you?"

"A table? Where?" my own voice breathless.

"Why, up here, of course! Oh, don't worry, it's perfectly safe. And anyway, Nichos knows."

"Knows?" I was taken aback, a little panicked. "What does he know?" "That we're dining together. In fact he suggested it. He didn't want me to eat alone—and since this is your last night . . . "

"I'll get a taxi right away," I told her.

"Good. I look forward to . . . seeing you. I shall be in the bar."

I replaced the telephone in its cradle, wondering if she always took an aperitif before the main course. . . .

I had smartened myself up. That is to say, I was immaculate. Black

bow tie, white evening jacket (courtesy of C & A), black trousers and a lightly-frilled white shirt, the only one I had ever owned. But I might have known that my appearance would never match up to hers. It seemed that everything she did was just perfectly right. I could only hope that that meant literally everything.

But in her black lace evening gown with its plunging neckline, short wide sleeves and delicate silver embroidery, she was stunning. Sitting with her in the bar, sipping our drinks—for me a large whiskey and for her a tall Cinzano—I couldn't take my eyes off her. Twice I reached out for her hand and twice she drew back from me.

"Discreet they may well be," she said, letting her oval green eyes flicker toward the bar, where guests stood and chatted, and back to me, "but there's really no need to give them occasion to gossip."

"I'm sorry, Adrienne," I told her, my voice husky and close to

trembling, "but-"

"How is it," she demurely cut me off, "that a good-looking man like you is—how do you say it?—going short?"

I sat back, chuckled. "That's a rather unladylike expression," I told her. "Oh? And what I've planned for tonight is ladylike?"

My voice went huskier still. "Just what is your plan?"

"While we eat," she answered, her voice low, "I shall tell you." At which point a waiter loomed, towel over his arm, inviting us to accompany him to the dining room.

Adrienne's portions were tiny, mine huge. She sipped a slender, light white wine, I gulped blocky rich red from a glass the waiter couldn't seem to leave alone. Mercifully I was hungry—I hadn't eaten all day—else that meal must surely have bloated me out. And all of it ordered in advance, the very best in quality cuisine.

"This," she eventually said, handing me her key, "fits the door of our suite." We were sitting back, enjoying liqueurs and cigarettes. "The rooms are on the ground floor. Tonight you enter through the door, tomorrow morning you leave via the window. A slow walk down to the seafront will refresh you. How is that for a plan?"

"Unbelievable!"

"You don't believe it?"

"Not my good fortune, no."

"Shall we say that we both have our needs?"

"I think," I said, "that I may be falling in love with you. What if I don't wish to leave in the morning?"

She shrugged, smiled, said: "Who knows what tomorrow may bring?"

How could I ever have thought of her simply as another girl? Or even an ordinary young woman? Girl she certainly was, woman, too, but so .

. . knowing! Beautiful as a princess and knowing as a whore.

If Mario's old myths and legends were reality, and if Nichos Karpethes were really Necros, then he'd surely picked the right companion. No man born could ever have resisted Adrienne, of that I was quite certain. These thoughts were in my mind—but dimly, at the back of my mind—as I left her smoking in the dining room and followed her directions to the suite of rooms at the rear of the hotel. In the front of my mind were other thoughts, much more vivid and completely erotic.

I found the suite, entered, left the door slightly ajar behind me.

The thing about an Italian room is its size. An entire suite of rooms is vast. As it happened I was only interested in one room, and Adrienne had obligingly left the door to that one open.

I was sweating. And yet . . . I shivered.

Adrienne had said fifteen minutes, time enough for her to smoke another cigarette and finish her drink. Then she would come to me. By now the entire staff of the hotel probably knew I was in here, but this was Italy.

V

I shivered again. Excitement? Probably.

I threw off my clothes, found my way to the bathroom, took the quickest shower of my life. Drying myself off, I padded back to the bedroom.

Between the main bedroom and the bathroom a smaller door stood ajar. I froze as I reached it, my senses suddenly alert, my ears seeming to stretch themselves into vast receivers to pick up any slightest sound. For there had been a sound, I was sure of it, from that room. . . .

A scratching? A rustle? A whisper? I couldn't say. But a sound, anyway. Adrienne would be coming soon. Standing outside that door I slowly recommenced toweling myself dry. My naked feet were still firmly rooted, but my hands automatically worked with the towel. It was nerves, only nerves. There had been no sound, or at worst only the night breeze off the sea, whispering in through an open window.

I stopped toweling, took another step toward the main bedroom, heard the sound again. A small, choking rasp. A tiny gasping for air.

Karpethes? What the hell was going on?

I shivered violently, my suddenly chill flesh shuddering in an uncon-

trollable spasm. But . . . I forced myself to action, returned to the main bedroom, quickly dressed (with the exceptions of my tie and jacket) and crept back to the small room.

Adrienne must be on her way to me even now. She mustn't find me poking my nose into things, like a suspicious kid. I must kill off this silly feeling that had my skin crawling. Not that an attack of nerves was unnatural in the circumstances, on the contrary, but I wasn't about to let it spoil the night. I pushed open the door of the room, entered into darkness, found the lightswitch. Then—

—I held my breath, flipped the switch.

The room was only half as big as the others. It contained a small single bed, a bedside table, a wardrobe. Nothing more, or at least nothing immediately apparent to my wildly darting eyes. My heart, which was racing, slowed and began to settle toward a steadier beat. The window was open, external shutters closed—but small night sounds were finding their way in through the louvres. The distant sounds of traffic, the toot of horns—holiday sounds from below.

I breathed deeply and gratefully, and saw something projecting from beneath the pillow on the bed. A corner of card or of dark leather, like a wallet or—

-Or a passport!

A Greek passport, Karpethes', when I opened it. But how could it be? The man in the photograph was young, no older than me. His birthdate proved it. And there was his name: Nichos Karpethes. Printed in Greek, of course, but still plain enough. His son?

Puzzling over the passport had served to distract me. My nerves had steadied up. I tossed the passport down, frowned at it where it lay upon the bed, breathed deeply once more . . . and froze solid!

A scratching, a hissing, a dry grunting—from the wardrobe.

Mice? Or did I in fact smell a rat?

Even as the short hairs bristled on the back of my neck I knew anger. There were too many unexplained things here. Too much I didn't understand. And what was it I feared? Old Mario's myths and legends? No, for in my experience the Italians are notorious for getting things wrong. Oh, yes, notorious . . .

I reached out, turned the wardrobe's doorknob, yanked the doors open.

At first I saw nothing of any importance or significance. My eyes didn't know what they sought. Shoes, patent leather, two pairs, stood side by side below. Tiny suits, no bigger than boys' sizes, hung above on steel hangers. And—my God, my God—a waistcoat!

I backed out of that little room on rubber legs, with the silence of the suite shrieking all about me, my eyes bugging, my jaw hanging slack—"Peter?"

She came in through the suite's main door, came floating toward me, eager, smiling, her green eyes glazing. Then blazing their suspicion, their anger as they saw my condition. "Peter!"

I lurched away as her hands reached for me, those hands I had never yet touched, which had never touched me. Then I was into the main bedroom, snatching my tie and jacket from the bed, (don't ask me why!) and out of the window, yelling some inarticulate, choking thing at her and lashing out frenziedly with my foot as she reached after me. Her eyes were bubbling green hells. "Peter!"

Her fingers closed on my forearm, bands of steel containing a fierce, hungry heat. And strong as two men she began to lift me back into her lair!

I put my feet against the wall, kicked, came free and crashed backward into shrubbery. Then up on my feet, gasping for air, running, tumbling, crashing into the night, down madly tilting slopes, through black chasms of mountain pine with the Mediterranean stars winking overhead, and the beckoning, friendly lights of the village seen occasionally below . . .

In the morning, looking up at the way I had descended and remembering the nightmare of my panic-flight, I counted myself lucky to have survived it. The place was precipitous. In the end I had fallen, but only for a short distance. All in utter darkness, and my head striking something hard. But . . .

I did survive. Survived both Adrienne and my flight from her.

And waking with the dawn, and gently fingering my bruises and the massive bump on my forehead, I made my staggering way back to my still slumbering hotel, let myself in and *locked* myself in my room—then sat there trembling and moaning until it was time for the coach.

Weak? Maybe I was, maybe I am.

But on my way into Genova, with people round me and the sun hot through the coach's windows, I could think again. I could roll up my sleeve and examine that claw mark of four slim fingers and a thumb, branded white into my suntanned flesh, where hair would never more grow on skin sere and wrinkled.

And seeing those marks I could also remember the wardrobe and the waistcoat—and what the waistcoat contained.

That tiny puppet of a man, alive still but barely, his stick-arms dangling through the waistcoat's armholes, his baby's head projecting, its chin supported by the tightly buttoned waistcoat's breast. And the large

#### 666 Brian Lumley

bulldog clip over the hanger's bar, its teeth fastened in the loose, wrinkled skin of his walnut head, holding it up. And his skinny little legs dangling, twig-things twitching there; and his pleading, pleading eyes!

But eyes are something I mustn't dwell upon. And green is a color I can no longer bear. . . .

## **Tattoos**

#### Jack Dann

Born in Johnson City, New York on February 15, 1945, Jack Dann is the author or editor of twenty-one books to date, including the novels Junction, Starhiker, The Man Who Melted, and the forthcoming mainstream novel, Counting Coup. His short stories have appeared in Omni, Playboy, Penthouse, and most of the leading science fiction magazines and anthologies. As an editor, his anthologies include Wandering Stars, More Wandering Stars, Immortal, and (with Gardner Dozois) a series of fantasy anthologies with zippy one-word titles like Unicorns! and Magicats!

Jack Dann currently lives in Binghamton, New York—the same town where horror editor/publisher Stuart David Schiff lives, and perhaps this influence is responsible for Dann's occasional forays into horror fiction. Dann's latest projects include an anthology of Vietnam stories entitled In Fields of Fire (edited with Jeanne Van Buren Dann), two more fantasy anthologies (edited with Gardner Dozois), and a historical fantasy novel about Leonardo da Vinci, Da Vinci Airborn.

# We are never like the angels till our passion dies. —Decker

FOR THE PAST few years we'd been going to a small fair, which wasn't really much more than a road show, in Trout Creek, a small village near Walton in upstate New York. The fair was always held in late September when the nights were chilly and the leaves had turned red and orange and dandelion yellow.

We were in the foothills of the Catskills. We drove past the Cannons-ville Reservoir, which provides drinking water for New York City. My wife Laura remarked that this was as close to dry as she'd ever seen the reservoir; she had grown up in this part of the country and knew it intimately. My son Ben, who is fourteen, didn't seem to notice anything.

He was listening to hard rock music through the headphones of his portable radio-cassette player.

Then we were on the fairgrounds, driving through a field of parked cars. Ben had the headphones off and was excited. I felt a surge of freedom and happiness. I wanted to ride the rides and lose myself in the arcades and exhibitions; I wanted crowds and the noise and smells of the midway. I wanted to forget my job and my recent heart attack.

We met Laura's family in the church tent. Then Laura and her Mom and sister went to look at saddles, for her sister showed horses, and Dad and Ben and I walked in the other direction.

As we walked past concession stands and through the arcade of shooting galleries, antique wooden horse race games, slots, and topple-the-milk-bottle games, hawkers shouted and gesticulated at us. We waited for Ben to lose his change at the shooting gallery and the loop-toss where all the spindles floated on water; and we went into the funhouse, which was mostly blind alleys and a few tarnished distorting mirrors. Then we walked by the tents of the freak-show: the Palace of Wonders with the original Lobster Man, Velda the Half-Lady, and "The Most Unusual Case in Medical History: Babies Born Chest to Chest."

"Come on," Dad said, "let's go inside and see the freaks."

"Nah," I said. "Places like this depress me. I don't feel right about staring at those people."

"That's how they make their money," Dad said. "Keeps 'em off social services."

I wasn't going to get into that with him.

"Well, then Bennie and me'll go in," Dad said. "If that's all right with you."

It wasn't, but I wasn't going to argue, so I reached into my pocket to give Ben some money, but Dad just shook his head and paid the woman sitting in a chair outside the tent. She gave him two tickets. "I'll meet you back here in about ten minutes," I said, glad to get away by myself.

I walked through the crowds, enjoying the rattle and shake of the concessionaires, all trying to grab a buck, the filthy, but brightly painted oil canvas, the sweet smell of cotton candy, the peppery smell of potatoes frying, and the coarse shouting of the kids. I bought some french fries, which were all the more delicious because I wasn't allowed to have them. Two young girls smiled and giggled as they passed me. Goddamn if this wasn't like being sixteen again.

Then something caught my eye.

I saw a group that looked completely out of place. Bikers, punkers, and well-dressed, yuppy-looking types were standing around a tattoo

parlor talking. The long-haired bikers flaunted their tattoos by wearing cut-off jeans jackets to expose their arms and chest; the women who rode with them had taken off their jackets and had delicate tattoo wristlets and red and orange butterflies and flowers worked into their arms or between their breasts. In contrast, most of the yuppies, whom I assumed to be from the city, wore long-sleeved shirts or tailored jackets, including the women, who looked like they had just walked out of a New England clothes catalogue. There was also a stout woman who looked to be in her seventies. She had gray hair pulled back into a tight bun and she wore a dark pleated dress. I couldn't help but think that she should be home in some Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn, sitting with friends in front of her apartment building, instead of standing here in the dust before a tattoo parlor.

I was transfixed. What had brought all these people here to the boonies? Who the hell knew, maybe they were all from here. But I couldn't believe that for a minute. And I wondered if they were *all* tattooed.

I walked over to them to hear snatches of conversation and to investigate the tattoo parlor, which wasn't a tent, as were most of the other concessions, but a small, modern mobile home with the words TAROT TATTOO STUDIO—ORIGINAL DESIGNS, EXPERT COVER-UPS painted across the side in large letters with red serifs through the stems. Then the door opened, and a heavy-set man with a bald head and a full black beard walked out. Everyone, including the yuppies, were admiring him. His entire head was tattooed in Japanese design of a flaming dragon; the dragon's head was high on his forehead, and a stream of flame reached down to the bridge of his nose. The dragon was beautifully executed. How the hell could someone disfigure his face like that? I wondered.

Behind the dragon man was a man of about five feet-six wearing a clean, but bloodied, white tee-shirt. He had brown curly hair, which was long overdue to be cut, a rather large nose, and a full mouth. He looked familiar, very familiar, yet I couldn't place him. This man was emaciated, as if he had given up nourishment for some cultish religious reason. Even his long, well-formed hands looked skeletal, the veins standing out like blue tattoos.

Then I remembered. He looked like Nathan Rivlin, an artist I had not seen in several years. A dear friend I had lost touch with. This man looked like Nathan, but he looked all wrong. I remembered Nathan as filled-out and full of life, an orthodox Jew who wouldn't answer the phone on Shabbes—from Friday night until sundown on Saturday, a man who

loved to stay up all night and talk and drink beer and smoke strong cigars. His wife's name was Ruth, and she was a highly-paid medical textbook illustrator. They had both lived in Israel for some time, and came from Chicago. But the man standing before me was ethereal-looking, as if he were made out of ectoplasm instead of flesh and blood. God forbid he should be Nathan Rivlin.

Yet I couldn't keep myself from shouting, "Nate? Nate, is it you?"

He looked around, and when he saw me, a pained grin passed across his face. I stepped toward him through the crowd. Several other people were trying to gain Nathan's attention. A woman told me to wait my turn, and a few nasty stares and comments were directed at me. I ignored them. "What the hell is all this?" I asked Nathan after we embraced.

"What should it be, it's a business," he said. Just then he seemed like the old Nathan I remembered. He had an impish face, a mobile face capable of great expression.

"Not what I'd expect, though," I said. I could see that his arms and neck were scarred; tiny whitish welts crisscrossed his shaved skin. Perhaps he had some sort of a skin rash, I told myself, but that didn't seem right to me. I was certain that Nathan had deliberately made those hairline scars. But why . . .? "Nate, what the hell happened to you?" I asked. "You just disappeared off the face of the earth. And Ruth too. How is Ruth?"

Nathan looked away from me, as if I had opened a recent wound. The stout, older woman who was standing a few feet away from us tried to get Nathan's attention. "Excuse me, but could I please talk to you?" she asked, a trace of foreign accent in her voice. "It's very important." She looked agitated and tired, and I noticed dark shadows under her eyes. But Nathan didn't seem to hear her. "It's a long story," he said to me, "and I don't think you'd want to hear it." He seemed suddenly cold and distant.

"Of course I would," I insisted.

"Excuse me, please," interrupted the older woman. "I've come a long way to see you," she said to Nathan, "and you've been talking to everyone else but me. And I've been waiting. . . ."

Nathan tried to ignore her, but she stepped right up to him and took his arm. He jerked away, as if he'd been shocked. I saw the faded, tattooed numbers just above her wrist. "Please . . ." she asked.

"Are you here for a cover-up?" Nathan asked her, glancing down at her arm.

"No," she said. "It wouldn't do any good."

"You shouldn't be here," Nathan said gently. "You should be home."

"I know you can help me."

Nathan nodded, as if accepting the inevitable. "I'll talk to you for a moment, but that's all," he said to her. "That's all." Then he looked up at me, smiled wanly, and led the woman into his trailer.

"You thinkin' about getting a tattoo?" Dad asked, catching me staring at the trailer. Ben was looking around at the punkers, sizing them up. He had persuaded his mother to let him have a 'rat-tail' when he went for his last haircut. It was just a small clump of hair that hung down in the back, but it gave him the appearance of rebelliousness; the real thing would be here soon enough. He turned his back to the punkers with their orange hair and long bleach-white rat-tails, probably to exhibit his own.

"Nah, just waiting for you," I said, lying, trying to ignore my feelings of loss and depression. Seeing Nathan had unnerved me. I felt old, as if Nathan's wasting had become my own.

We spend the rest of the day at the fair, had dinner at Mom and Dad's, watched television, and left at about eleven o'clock. We were all exhausted. I hadn't said anything to Laura about seeing Nathan. I knew she would want to see him, and I didn't want her upset, at least that's what I told myself.

Ben fell asleep in the back seat. Laura watched out for deer while I drove, as my night-vision is poor. She should be the one to drive, but it hurts her legs to sit—she has arthritis. Most of the time her legs are stretched out as far as possible in the foot well or she'll prop her feet against the dashboard. I fought the numbing hypnosis of the road. Every mile felt like ten. I kept thinking about Nathan, how he looked, what he had become.

"David, what's the matter?" Laura asked when we were about halfway home. "You're so quiet tonight. Is anything wrong? Did we do anything to upset you?"

"No, I'm just tired," I said, lying. Seeing Nathan had shocked and depressed me. But there was a selfish edge to my feelings. It was as though I had looked in one of the distorting mirrors in the funhouse; I had seen something of myself in Nathan.

Ben yelped, lurching out of a particularly bad nightmare. He leaned forward, hugging the back of the front seat, and asked us if we were home yet.

"We've got a way to go," I said. "Sit back, you'll fall asleep."

"I'm cold back here."

I turned up the heat; the temperature had dropped at least fifteen

degrees since the afternoon. "The freak show probably gave you night-mares; it always did me."

"That's not it," Ben insisted.

"I don't know what's wrong with your grandfather," Laura said. "He had no business taking you in there. He should have his head examined."

"I told you," Ben said, "it had nothing to do with that."

"You want to talk about it?" I asked.

"No," Ben said, but he didn't sit back in his seat; he kept his face just behind us.

"You should sit back," Laura said. "If we got into an accident—"

"Okay," Ben said. There was silence for a minute, and then he said, "You know who I dreamed about?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Uncle Nathan."

I straightened up, automatically looking into the rearview mirror to see Ben, but it was too dark. I felt a chill and turned up the heat another notch.

"We haven't seen him in about four years," Laura said. "Whatever made you dream about him?"

"I dunno," Ben said. "But I dreamed he was all different colors, all painted, like a monster."

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

"You were dreaming about the freak show," Laura told him. "Sometimes old memories of people we know get mixed up with new memories."

"It wasn't just Uncle Nathan looking like that scared me."

"What was it?" I asked.

He pulled himself toward us again. But he spoke to Laura. "He was doing something to Dad," Ben said, meaning me.

"What was he doing?" Laura asked.

"I dunno," Ben said, "but it was horrible, like he was pulling out Dad's heart or something."

"Jesus Christ," Laura said. "Look, honey, it was only a dream," she said to him. "Forget about it and try to go back to sleep."

I tried to visualize the lines on Nathan's arms and neck and keep the car on the road.

I knew I had to go back and see him.

Monday morning I finished an overdue fund-raising report for the Binghamton Symphony with the help of my secretary. The three o'clock meeting with the board of directors went well; I was congratulated for a job well done, and my future seemed secure for another six months. I called Laura, told her I had another meeting, and that I would be home later than usual. Laura had a deadline of her own—she was writing an article for a travel magazine—and was happy for the stretch of worktime. She was only going to send out for a pizza anyway.

The drive to the fairgrounds seemed to take longer than usual, but that was probably because I was impatient and tense about seeing Nathan. Ben's crazy dream had spooked me; I also felt guilty about lying to Laura. We had a thing about not lying to each other, although there were some things we didn't talk about, radioactive spots from the past which still burned, but which we pretended were dead.

There weren't as many people on the fairgrounds as last night, but that was to be expected, and I was glad for it.

I parked close to the arcades, walked through the huckster's alley and came to Nathan Rivlin's trailer. It was dusk, and there was a chill in the air—a harbinger of the hard winter that was to come. A few kids wearing army jackets were loitering, looking at the designs of tattoos on paper, called flash, which were displayed under plexiglass on a table secured to the trailer. The designs were nicely executed, but ordinary stuff to attract the passers-by: anchors, hearts, butterflies, stylized women in profile, eagles, dragons, stars, various military insignia, cartoon characters, death-heads, flags, black panthers and lions, snakes, spiders; nothing to indicate the kind of fine work that had been sported by the people hanging around the trailer yesterday.

I knocked on the door. Nathan didn't seem surprised to see me; he welcomed me inside. It was warm inside the trailer, close, and Nathan was wearing a sixties hippy-style white gauze shirt; the sleeves were long and the cuffs buttoned, hiding the scars I had seen on his arms yesterday. Once again I felt a shock at seeing him so gaunt, at seeing the webbed scars on his neck. Was I returning to my friend's out of just a morbid fascination to see what he had become? I felt guilty and ashamed. Why hadn't I sought out Nathan before this? If I had been a better friend, I probably would have.

Walking into his studio was like stepping into his paintings, which covered most of the available wall space. Nathan was known for working on large canvases, and some of his best work was in here—paintings I had seen in process years ago. On the wall opposite the door was a painting of a nude man weaving a cat's cradle. The light was directed from behind, highlighting shoulders and arms and the large, peasant hands. The features of the face were blurred, but unmistakably Nathan's. Beside it was a huge painting of three circus people, two jugglers standing

beside a woman. Behind them, in large red letters was the word CIRCUS. The faces were ordinary, and disturbing, perhaps because of that. There was another painting on the wall where Nathan had set up his tattoo studio. A self-portrait. Nathan wearing a blue worker's hat, red shirt, and apron, and standing beside a laboratory skeleton. And there were many paintings I had never seen, a whole series of tattoo paintings, which at first glance looked to be nonrepresentational, until the designs of figures on flesh came into focus. There were several paintings of gypsies. One, in particular, seemed to be staring directly at me over tarot cards, which were laid out on a table strewn with glasses. There was another painting of an old man being carried from his death-bed by a sad-faced demon. Nathan had a luminous technique, an execution like that of the old masters. Between the paintings, and covering every available space, was flash; not the flash that I had seen outside, but detailed colored design and drawings of men and animals and mythical beasts, as grotesque as anything by Goya. I was staring into my own nightmares.

The bluish light that comes just before dark suffused the trailer, and the shadows seemed to become more concrete than the walls or paintings.

The older woman I had seen on Sunday was back. She was sitting in Nathan's studio, in what looked like a variation of a dentist's chair. Beside the chair was a cabinet and a sink with a high, elongated faucet, the kind usually seen in examination rooms. Pigments, dyes, paper towels, napkins, bandages, charcoal for stencils, needle tubes and bottles of soap and alcohol were neatly displayed beside an autoclave. I was surprised to see this woman in the chair, even though I knew she had been desperate to see Nathan. But she just didn't seem the sort to be getting a tattoo, although that probably didn't mean a thing: anyone could have hidden tattoos: old ladies, senators, presidents. Didn't Barry Goldwater brag that he had two dots tattooed on his hand to represent the bite of a snake? Who the hell knew why.

"I'll be done in a few minutes," Nathan said to me. "Sit down. Would you like a drink? I've got some beer, I think. If you're hungry, I've got soup on the stove." Nathan was a vegetarian; he always used to make the same miso soup, which he'd start when he got up in the morning, every morning.

"If you don't mind, I'll just sit," I said, and I sat down on an old green art deco couch. The living room was made up of the couch, two slat back chairs, and a television set on a battered oak desk. The kitchenette behind Nathan's work area had a stove, a small refrigerator, and a table attached

to the wall. And, indeed, I could smell the familiar aroma of Nathan's

soup.

"Steve, this is Mrs. Stramm," Nathan said, and he seemed to be drawn toward me, away from Mrs. Stramm, who looked nervous. I wanted to talk with him . . . connect with him . . . find the man I used to know.

"Mister Tarot," the woman said, "I'm ready now, you can go ahead." Nathan sat down in the chair beside her and switched on a gooseneck adjustable lamp, which produced a strong, intense white light. The flash and paintings in the room lost their fire and brilliance, as the darkness

in the trailer seemed to gain substance.

"Do you think you can help me?" she asked. "Do you think it will work?"

"If you wish to believe in it," Nathan said. He picked up his electrical tattoo machine, examined it, and then examined her wrist, where the concentration camp tattoo had faded into seven smudgy blue marks.

"You know, when I got these numbers at the camp, it was a doctor who put them on. He was a prisoner, like I was. He didn't have a machine like yours. He worked for Dr. Mengele." She looked away from Nathan while she spoke, just as many people look away from a nurse about to stick a needle in their vein. But she seemed to have a need to talk. Perhaps it was just nerves.

Nathan turned on his instrument, which made a staticky, electric noise, and began tattooing her wrist. I watched him work; he didn't seem to have heard a word she said. He looked tense and bit his lip, as if it was his own wrist that was being tattooed. "I knew Mengele," the woman continued. "Do you know who he was?" she asked Nathan. Nathan didn't answer. "Of course you do," she said. "He was such a nice looking man. Kept his hair very neat, clipped his mustache, and he had blue eyes. Like the sky. Everything else in the camp was gray, and the sky would get black from the furnaces, like the world was turned upside down." She continued to talk while Nathan worked. She grimaced from the pain of the tattoo needle.

I tried to imagine what she might have looked like when she was young, when she was in the camp. It would have been Auschwitz, I surmised, if Mengele was there.

But why was a Jew getting a tattoo?

Perhaps she wasn't Jewish.

And then I noticed that Nathan's wrist was bleeding. Tiny beads of blood soaked through his shirt, which was like a blotter.

"Nathan—" I said, as I reflexively stood up.

But Nathan looked at me sharply and shook his head, indicating that I should stay where I was. "It's all right, David. We'll talk about it later."

I sat back down and watched them, mesmerized.

Mrs. Stramm stopped talking; she seemed calmer now. There was only the sound of the machine, and the background noise of the fair. The air seemed heavier in the darkness, almost smothering. "Yesterday you told me that you came here to see me to find out about your husband," Nathan said to her. "You lied to me, didn't you."

"I had to know if he was alive," she said. "He was a strong man, he could have survived. I left messages through the agencies for him when I was in Italy. I couldn't stand to go back to Germany. I thought to go to South America, I had friends in Sao Paulo."

"You came to America to cut yourself off from the past," Nathan said in a low voice. "You knew your husband had died. I can feel that you buried him . . . in your heart. But you couldn't bury everything. The tattoo is changing. Do you want me to stop? I have covered the numbers."

I couldn't see what design he had made. Her wrist was bleeding, though . . . as was his.

Then she began to cry, and suddenly seemed angry. But she was directing her pain and anger at herself. Nathan stopped working, but made no move to comfort her. When Mrs. Stramm's crying subsided and she regained control of her breathing, she said, "I murdered my infant. I had help from another, who thought she was saving my life." She seemed surprised at her own words.

"Do you want me to stop," Nathan asked again, but his voice was gentle.

"You do what you think, you're the tattooist."

Nathan began again. The noise of his machine was teeth-jarring. Mrs. Stramm continued talking to him, even though she still looked away from the machine. But she talked in a low voice now. I had to lean forward and strain to hear her. My eyes were fixed on Nathan's wrist; the dots of blood had connected into a large bright stain on his shirt cuff.

"I was only seventeen," Mrs. Stramm continued. "Just married and pregnant. I had my baby in the camp and Dr. Mengele delivered it himself. It wasn't so bad in the hospital. I was taken care of as if I were in a hospital in Berlin. Everything was nice, clean. I even pretended that what was going on outside the hospital in the camp, in the ovens, wasn't true. When I had the baby—his name was Stefan—everything was perfect. Dr. Mengele was very careful when he cut the cord; and another doctor assisted him, a Jewish doctor from the camp. Ach!" she said, flinching; she looked down at her wrist, where Nathan was working, but

she didn't say a word about the blood soaking through his shirtsleeve. She seemed to accept it as part of the process. Nathan must have told her what to expect. He stopped, and refilled his instrument with another ink pigment.

"But then I was sent to a barracks, which was filthy, but not terribly crowded," she continued. "There were other children in there, mutilated. One set of twins had been sewn together, back to back, arm to arm, and they smelled terrible. They were an experiment, of course. I knew that my baby and I were going to be an experiment. There was a woman in the barracks looking after us. She couldn't do much, but watch the children die. She felt sorry for me. She told me that nothing could be done for my baby. And after they had finished their experiment and killed my son, then I would be killed also; it was the way it was done. Dr. Mengele killed all surviving parents and healthy siblings for comparison. My only hope, she said, was to kill my baby myself. If my baby died 'naturally' before Mengele began his experiment, then he might let me live. I remember thinking to myself that it was the only way I could save my baby the agony of a terrible death at the hands of Mengele.

"So I suffocated my baby. I pinched his nose and held his mouth shut while my friend held us both and cried for us. I remember that very well. Dr. Mengele learned of my baby's death and came to the barracks himself. He said he was very sorry, and, you know, I believed him. I took comfort from the man who had made me kill my child. I should have begged him to kill me. But I said nothing."

"What could you have done?" Nathan asked, as he was working. "Your child would have died no matter what. You saved yourself, that's all you could do under the circumstances."

"Is that how you would have felt, if you were me?"

"No," Nathan said, and a sad smile appeared for an instant, an inappropriate response, yet somehow telling.

Mrs. Stramm stopped talking and had closed her eyes. It was as if she and Nathan were praying together. I could feel that, and I sensed that something else was happening between them. Something seemed to be passing out of her, a dark, palpable spirit. I could feel its presence in the room. And Nathan looked somehow different, more defined. It was the light from the lamp, no doubt, but some kind of exchange seemed to be taking place. Solid, solid Mrs. Stramm looked softer, as if lighter, while Nathan looked as ravaged as an internee. It was as if he were becoming defined by this woman's past.

When Nathan finished, he put his instrument down on the cabinet, and taped some gauze over his own bleeding wrist. Then he just stared

at his work on Mrs. Stramm. I couldn't see the tattoo from where I was sitting, so I stood up and walked over. "Is it all right if I take a look?" I asked, but neither one answered me . . . neither one seemed to notice me.

The tattoo was beautiful, lifelike in a way I had not thought possible for a marking on the flesh. It was the cherubic face of an angel with thin, curly hair. One of the numbers had now become the shading for the angel's fine, straight nose. Surrounding the face were dark feathered wings that crossed each other; an impossible figure, but a hauntingly sad and beautiful one. The eyes seemed to be looking upward and out, as if contemplating a high station of paradise. The numbers were lost in the blue-blackness of lifting wings. This figure looked familiar, which was not surprising, as Nathan had studied the work of the masters. I remembered a Madonna, which was attributed to the Renaissance artist Lorenzo de Credi, that had two angels with wings such as those on the tattoo. But the tattooed wings were so dark they reminded me of death; and they were bleeding, an incongruous testament to life.

I thought about Nathan's bleeding wrist, and wonder. . . .

"It's beautiful," Mrs. Stramm said, staring at her tattoo. "It's the right face, it's the way his face would have looked . . . had he lived." Then she stood up abruptly. Nathan sat where he was; he looked exhausted, which was how I suddenly felt.

"I must put a gauze wrap over it," Nathan said.

"No, I wish to look at him."

"Can you see the old numbers?" Nathan asked.

"No," she said at first, then, "Yes, I can see them."

"Good," Nathan said.

She stood before Nathan, and I could now see that she had once been beautiful: big-boned, proud, full-bodied, with a strong chin and regal face. Her fine gray hair had probably been blonde, as her eyebrows were light. And she looked relieved, released. I couldn't help but think that she seemed now like a woman who had just given birth. The strain was gone. She no longer seemed gravid with the burden of sorrow. But the heaviness had not disappeared from the room, for I could feel the psychic closeness of grief like stale, humid air. Nathan looked wasted in the sharp, cleansing, focused light.

"Would you mind if I looked at your tattoo?" Mrs. Stramm asked.

"I'm sorry," Nathan said.

Mrs. Stramm nodded, then picked up her handbag and took out her checkbook. She moved toward the light and began to scribble out a check. "Will you accept three hundred dollars?"

"No, I cannot. Consider it paid."

She started to argue, but Nathan turned away from her. "Thank you," she said, and walked to the door.

Nathan didn't answer.

Nathan turned on the overhead light; the sudden change from darkness to light unnerved me.

"Tell me what the hell's going on," I said. "Why did your wrist start

bleeding when you were tattooing that woman?"

"It's part of the process," Nathan said vaguely. "Do you want coffee?" he asked, changing the subject—Nathan had a way of talking around any subject, peeling away layers as if conversation was an onion; he eschewed directness. Perhaps it was his rabbinical heritage. At any rate, he wasn't going to tell me anything until he was ready. I nodded, and he took a bag of ground coffee out of his freezer, and dripped a pot in the Melitta. Someone knocked at the door and demanded a tattoo, and Nathan told him that he would have to wait until tomorrow.

We sat at the table and sipped coffee. I felt an overwhelming lassitude come over me. My shoulder began to ache . . . to throb. I worried that this might be the onset of another heart attack (I try not to pay attention to my hypochondria, but those thoughts still flash through my mind, no matter how rational I try to be). Surely it was muscular, I told myself: I had been wrestling with my son last night. I needed to start swimming again at the "Y." I was out of shape, and right now I felt more like sixty-two than forty-two. After a while, the coffee cleared my head a bit—it was a very, very strong blend, Pico, I think—but the atmosphere inside the trailer was still oppressive, even with the overhead light turned on. It was as if I could *feel* the shadows.

"I saw Mrs. Stramm here yesterday afternoon," I said, trying to lead Nathan. "She seems Jewish, strange that she should be getting a tattoo. Although maybe not so strange, since she came to a Jewish tattooist." I forced a laugh and tried not to stare at the thin webbing of scars on his neck.

"She's not Jewish," Nathan said. "Catholic. She was interred in the camp for political reasons. Her family was caught hiding Jews."

"It seems odd that she'd come to you for a tattoo to cover up her numbers," I said. "She could have had surgery. You would hardly be able to tell they'd ever been there."

"That's not why she came."

"Nathan..."

"Most of the people just want tattoos," Nathan said. He seemed slightly

defensive, and then he sighed and said, "But sometimes I get people like Mrs. Stramm. Word gets around, word-of-mouth. Sometimes I can sense things, see things about people when I'm tattooing. It's something like automatic writing, maybe. Then the tattoo takes on a life of its own, and sometimes it changes the person I tattoo."

"This whole thing . . . it seems completely crazy," I said, remembering his paintings, the large canvases of circus people, carny people. He had made his reputation with those melancholy, poignant oil paintings. He had traveled, followed the carnies. Ruth didn't seem to mind. She was independent, and used to travel quite a bit by herself also; she was fond of taking grueling, long day-trips. Like Nathan, she was full of energy. I remember that Nathan had been drawn to tattooing through circus people. He visited tattoo studios, and used them for his settings. The paintings he produced then were haunted, and he became interested in the idea of living art, the relationship of art to society, the numinal, symbolic quality of primitive art. It was only natural that he'd want to try tattooing, which he did. He had even tattooed himself: a tiny raven that seemed to be forever nestled in his palm. But that had been a phase, and once he had had his big New York show, he went on to paint ordinary people in parks and shopping malls and in movie houses, and his paintings were selling at over five thousand dollars apiece. I remembered ribbing him for tattooing himself. I had told him he couldn't be buried in a Jewish cemetery. He had said that he had already bought his plot. Money talks.

"How's Ruth?" I asked, afraid of what he would tell me. He would never be here, he would never look like this, if everything was all right between them.

"She's dead," he whispered, and he took a sip of his coffee.

"What?" I asked, shocked. "How?"

"Cancer, as she was always afraid of."

The pain in my shoulder became worse, and I started to sweat. It seemed to be getting warmer; he must have turned the heat up.

"How could all this happen without Laura or me knowing about it?" I asked. "I just can't believe it."

"Ruth went back to Connecticut to stay with her parents."

"Why?"

"David," Nathan said, "I knew she had cancer, even when she went in for tests and they all turned out negative. I kept dreaming about it, and I could see it burning inside her. I thought I was going crazy...I probably was. I couldn't stand it. I couldn't be near her. I couldn't help her. I couldn't do anything. So I started traveling, got back into the tattoo

culture. The paintings were selling, especially the tattoo stuff—I did a lot of close-up work, you wouldn't even know it was tattoos I was painting, I got into some beautiful oriental stuff—so I stayed away."

"And she died without you?" I asked, incredulous.

"In Stamford. The dreams got worse. It got so I couldn't even talk to her over the phone. I could see what was happening inside her and I was helpless. And I was a coward. I'm paying for it now."

"What do you mean?" I asked. Goddammit, it was hot.

He didn't answer.

"Tell me about the scars on your neck and your arms."

"And my chest, everywhere," Nathan confessed. "They're tattoos. It started when I ran away, when I left Ruth, I started tattooing myself. I used the tattoo gun, but no ink."

"Why?" I asked.

"At first, I guess I did it as practice, but then it became a sort of punishment. It was painful. I was painting without pigments. I was inflicting my own punishment. Sometimes I can see the tattoos, as if they were paintings. I'm a map of what I've done to my wife, to my family; and then around that time I discovered I could see into other people, and sort of draw their lives differently. Most people I'd just give a tattoo, good work, sometimes even great work, maybe, but every once in a while I'd see something when I was working. I could see if someone was sick, I could see what was wrong with him. I was going the carny route, and living with some gypsy people. A woman, a friend of mine, saw my 'talent'—he laughed when he said that— "and helped me develop it. That's when I started bleeding when I worked. As my friend used to tell me, 'Everything has a price.'

I looked at Nathan. His life was draining away. He was turning into a

ghost, or a shadow. Not even his tattoos had color.

My whole arm was aching. I couldn't ignore it any longer. And it was so close in the trailer that I couldn't *breathe*. "I've got to get some air," I said as I forced myself to get up. I felt as if I hadn't slept in days. Then I felt a burning in my neck and a stabbing pain in my chest. I tried to shout to Nathan, who was standing up, who looked shocked, who was coming toward me.

But I couldn't move; I was as leaden as a statue.

I could only see Nathan, and it was as if he were lit by a tensor lamp. The pigments of living tattoos glowed under his shirt, and resolved themselves like paintings under a stage scrim. He was a living, radiant landscape of scenes and figures, terrestrial and heavenly and demonic. I could see a grotesque caricature of Mrs. Stramm's tattoo on Nathan's

wrist. It was a howling, tortured, winged child. Most of the other tattoos expressed the ugly, minor sins of people Nathan had tattooed, but there were also figures of Nathan and Ruth. All of Ruth's faces were Madonnalike, but Nathan was rendered perfectly, and terribly; he was a monster portrayed in entirely human terms, a visage of greed and cowardice and hardness. But there was a central tattoo on Nathan's chest that looked like a Durer engraving—such was the sureness and delicacy of the work. Ruth lay upon the ground, amid grasses and plants and flowers, which seemed surreal in their juxtaposition. She had opened her arms, as it begging for Nathan, who was depicted also, to return. Her chest and stomach and neck were bleeding, and one could look into the cavities of the open wounds. And marching away, descending under the nipple of Nathan's chest, was the figure of Nathan. He was followed by cheruba riding fabulous beasts, some of which were the skeletons of horses and dogs and goats with feathery wings . . . wings such as Nathan had tattooed on Mrs. Stramm. But the figure of Nathan was running away-His face, which had always seemed askew-a large nose, deep-set engaging eyes, tousled hair, the combination of features that made him look like a seedy Puck, the very embodiment of generous friendlinesswas rendered formally. His nose was straight and long, rather than crooked, as it was in real life, and his eyes were narrow and tilted, rather than wide and roundish; and his mouth, which in real life, even now, was full, was drawn as a mere line. In his hands, Nathan was carrying Ruth's heart and other organs, while a child riding a skeleton Pegasus was waving a thighbone.

The colors were like an explosion, and the tattoos filled my entire field of vision; and then the pain took me, wrapped like a snake around my chest. My heart was pounding. It seemed to be echoing in a huge hall. It was all I could hear. The burning in my chest increased and I felt myse screaming, even if it might be soundless. I felt my entire being strainin in fright, and then the colors dimmed. Fainting, falling, I caught one langlimpse of the walls and ceiling, all pulsing, glowing, all coalescing ir one grand tattoo, which was all around me, and I followed those inkepigment paths into grayness and then darkness. I thought of Laura a

Ben, and I felt an overwhelming sense of sorrow for Nathan.

For once, I didn't seem to matter, and my sense of rushing sadn-

became a universe in which I was suspended.

I thought I was dying, but it seemed that it would take an eternity, eternity to think, to worry back over my life, to relive it once more, but from a higher perspective, from an aerial view. But then I felt a pressure as if I were under water and a faraway explosion had fomented a strog

current. I was being pulled away, jostled, and I felt the tearing of pain and saw a bright light and heard an electrical sparking, a sawing. And I saw Nathan's face, as large as a continent gazing down upon me.

I woke up on his couch. My head was pounding, but I was breathing naturally, evenly. My arm and shoulder and chest no longer ached, although I felt a needlelike burning over my heart. Reflexively, I touched the spot where I had felt the tearing pain, and found it had been andaged. "What the hell's this?" I asked Nathan, who was sitting beside the although I could make out the scars on his neck, I could no longer and the outlines of the tattoos I had seen, nor could I make out the rilliant pigments that I had imagined or hallucinated. "Why do I have a bandage on?" I felt panic.

"Do you remember what happened?" he asked. Nathan looked ill. Even more wasted. His face was shiny with sweat. But it wasn't warm in here now; it was comfortable. Yet with Mrs. Stramm was sitting for her tattoo, it was stifling. I had felt the closeness of dead air like claustrophobia.

"Christ, I thought I was having a heart attack. I blacked out. I fell."

"I caught you. You did have a heart attack."

"Then why the hell am I here instead of in a hospital?" I asked, remembering how it felt to be completely helpless in the emergency room, machines whirring and making ticking and just audible beeping noises as they monitored vital signs.

"It could have been very bad," Nathan said, ignoring my question.

"Then what am I doing here?" I asked again. I sat up. This was all wrong. Goddammit, it was wrong. I felt a rush in my head, and the neadache became sharp and then withdrew back into dull pain.

"I took care of it," he said.

How?"

"How do you feel?"

"I have a headache, that's all," I said, "and I want to know what you all on my chest."

"Don't worry, I didn't use pigment. They'll let you into a Jewish etery." Nathan smiled.

"I want to know what you did." I started to pull off the gauze, but he ppped me.

"Let it heal for a few days. Change the bandage. That's all."

"And what the hell am I supposed to tell Laura?" I asked.

"That you're alive."

I felt weak, yet it was as if I had sloughed something off, something avy and deadening.

And I just walked out the door.

After I was outside, shivering, for the weather had turned unseasonably cold, I realized that I had not said goodbye. I had left, as if in a daze Yet I could not turn around and go back. This whole night was crazy, told myself. I'd come back tomorrow and apologize . . . and try to fine out what had really happened.

I drove home, and it began to snow, a freakish wet, heavy snow tha

turned everything bluish-white, luminescent.

My chest began to itch under the bandage.

I didn't get home until after twelve. Understandably, Laura was worried and anxious. We both sat down to talk in the upholstered chairs in front of the fireplace in the living room, facing each other; that was where we always sat when we were arguing or working out problems. Normally, we'd sit on the sofa and chat and watch the fire. Laura had a fire crackling in the fireplace; and, as there were only a few small lamps on downstairs, the ruddy light from the fire flickered in our large, white-carpeted living room. Laura wore a robe with large cuffs on the sleeves and her thick black hair was long and shiny, still damp from a shower. Her small face was tight, as she was upset, and she wore her glasses, another give-away that she was going to get to the bottom of this. She almost never wore her glasses, and the lenses were scratched from being tossed here and there and being banged about in various drawers; she only used them when she had to "focus her thoughts."

I looked a sight: my once starched white shirt was wrinkled and grimy, and I smelled rancid, the particular odor of nervous sweat. My trousers were dirty, especially at the knees, where I had fallen to the floor, and I

had somehow torn out the hem of my right pantleg.

I told Laura the whole story, what had happened from the time I had seen Nathan Sunday until tonight. At first she seemed relieved that I had been with Nathan-she had never been entirely sure of me, and I'm certain she thought I'd had a rendezvous with some twenty-two year old receptionist or perhaps the woman who played the french horn in the orchestra—I had once made a remark about her to Laura. But she was more upset that I had expected when I told her that Ruth had died. We were friends, certainly, although I was much closer to Nathan than she was to Ruth.

We moved over to the couch and I held her until she stopped crying. I got up, fixed us both a drink, and finished the story.

"How could you let him tattoo your skin?" Laura asked; and then, exposing what she was really thinking about, she said in a whisper, "I can't believe Ruth's gone. We were good friends, you didn't know that,

did you?"

"I guess I didn't." After a pause, I said, "I didn't let Nathan tattoo me. I told you, I was unconscious. I'd had an attack or something." I don't know if Laura really believed that. She had been a nurse for fifteen years.

"Well, let me take a look at what's under the gauze."

I let her unbutton my shirt; with one quick motion, she tore the gauze away. Looking down, I just saw the crisscrossings and curlicues and random lines that were thin raised welts over my heart.

"What the hell did he do to you? This whole area could get infected. Who knows if his needle was even clean. You could get hepatitis, or AIDS,

considering the kinds of people who go in for tattoos."

"No, he kept everything clean," I said.
"Did he have an autoclave?" she asked.

"Yes, I think he did."

Laura went to the downstairs bathroom and came back with betadine and a clean bandage. Her fuzzy blue bathrobe was slightly open, and I felt myself becoming excited. She was a tiny woman, small boned and delicate-featured, yet big-busted, which I liked. When we first lived together, before we married, she was extremely shy in bed, even though she'd already been married before; yet she soon became aggressive, open, and frank, and to my astonishment I found that I had grown more conservative.

I touched her breasts as she cleaned the tattoo, or more precisely, the welts, for he used no pigment. The betadine and the touch of her hands felt cool on my chest.

"Can you make anything out of this?" she asked, meaning the marks Nathan had made.

I looked down, but couldn't make anything more out of them than she could. I wanted to look at the marks closely in the mirror, but Laura had become excited, as I was, and we started making love on the couch. She was on top of me, we still had our clothes on, and we were kissing each other so hard that we ground our teeth. I pressed myself inside her. Our lovemaking was urgent and cleansing. It was as if we had recovered something, and I felt my heart beating, clear and strong. After we came and lay locked together, still intimate, she whispered, "Poor Nathan."

I dreamed about him that night. I dreamed of the tattoo I had seen on his chest, the parade of demons and fabulous creatures. I was inside his tattoo, watching him walking off with Ruth's heart. I could hear the demon angels shouting and snarling and waving pieces of bone as they

rode atop unicorns and skeleton dragons flapping canvas-skinned pterodactyl wings. Then Nathan saw me, and he stopped. He looked as skeletal as the creatures around him, as if his life and musculature and fat had been worn away, leaving nothing but bones to be buried.

He smiled at me and gave me Ruth's heart.

It was warm and still beating. I could feel the blood clotting in my hand. I woke up with a jolt. I was shaking and sweating. Although I had turned up the thermostat before going to bed, it was cold in the bedroom. Laura was turned away from me, moving restlessly, her legs raised toward her chest in a semi-fetal position. All the lights were off, and as it was a moonlit night, the snow reflected a wan light; everything in the room looked shadowy blue. And I felt my heart pumping fast.

I got up and went to the bathroom. Two large dormer windows over the tub to my left let in the dim light of a streetlamp near the southern corner of the house. I looked in the mirror at my chest and could see my tattoo. The lines were etched in blue, as if my body were snow reflecting moonlight. I could see a heart; it was luminescent. I saw an angel wrapped in deathly wings, an angel such as the one Nathan had put on Mrs. Stramm's wrist to heal her; but this angel, who seemed to have some of Nathan's features—his crooked nose and full mouth, had spread his wings, and his perfect infant hands held out Ruth's heart to me.

Staring, I leaned on the white porcelain sink. I felt a surging of life, as if I was being given a gift, and then the living image of the tattoo died. I shivered naked in the cold bathroom. I could feel the chill passing through the ill-fitting storms of the dormer windows. It was as if the chill were passing right through me, as if I had been opened up wide.

And I knew that Nathan was in trouble. The thought came to me like a shock of cold water. But I could *feel* Nathan's presence, and I suddenly felt pain shoot through my chest, concentrated in the tattoo, and then I felt a great sadness, an oceanic grief.

I dressed quickly and drove back to Trout Creek. The fairgrounds were well-lit, but deserted. It had stopped snowing. The lights were on in Nathan's trailer. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer. The door was unlocked, as I had left it, and I walked in.

Nathan was dead on the floor. His shirt was open and his chest was bleeding—he had the same tattoo I did. But his face was calm, his demons finally exorcised. I picked him up, carried him to the couch, and kissed him goodbye.

As I left, I could feel his strength and sadness and love pumping inside me. The wind blew against my face, drying my tears . . . it was the cold fluttering of angel's wings.

# **Acquiring A Family**

## R. Chetwynd-Hayes

While relatively little known in the United States, R. Chetwynd-Hayes has become a major figure in horror fiction in England over the past two decades. Born in Isleworth, Middlesex on May 30, 1919, Chetwynd-Hayes had his first sale in 1954, but it wasn't until 1971 with his first collection of horror stories, The Unbidden, that he became active within his genre. Very active, indeed. Chetwynd-Hayes has written some twenty-five novels and collections of short stories and has edited another twenty-five horror anthologies—including the 9th through 20th volumes of The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories. There have been two films based on his work: From Beyond the Grave and The Monster Club. His latest books include Tales from the Shadows, Tales from the Haunted House, and Dracula's Children.

As a rule, R. Chetwynd-Hayes works within traditional horror concepts—hauntings, monsters, supernatural powers—although the results are often unexpected twists or just plain twisted. Like Robert Bloch, Chetwynd-Hayes frequently mixes humor and horror together, as anyone who has read or seen The Monster Club will attest. However, I don't think "Acquiring a Family" will leave you laughing.

CELIA WATSON examined the front of her new house with a critical eye, but could detect nothing lacking. The five windows—three up and two down—gleamed as only freshly cleaned glass can; the red brickwood looked as if it had been washed and sanded in the not too distant past, while frames, guttering and front door glittered with recently applied green paint.

Celia had dreamed of such a house for a long time and it was only the event of an ancient uncle's demise and the acquisition of his money, that had enabled her to buy this one. She was grateful for the late uncle's thoughtfulness in leaving her the wherewithal to enjoy not only this dream house, but sufficient funds to never again have to consider the dire prospect of gainful employment.

She took a large key from her handbag, fitted it into a keyhole, then

flung the door open.

The pseudo antique furniture suited the small house, ranging as it did from a credence table and umbrella-cum-hat-stand in the tiny hall, to the looming Tudor-style wardrobe and bed in what might be called the main bedroom. The last owner had decorated all the walls with light brown emulsion paint, and although this served as an excellent background for the furniture, it did have a rather depressing effect when viewed for the first time, but even this Celia managed to ignore. She had seen the interior of the house before of course and agreed to take it as it stood, furniture, decor and all; she hoped she would live there for many years and die contented—if not happy—in the vast Tudor-style bed.

Such is one of the illusions that make up the foundation of that great

fantasy we call life.

Celia Watson spoke aloud: "This is what I have always wanted. Thanks

to God I am not too old to enjoy it."

She was fifty-three, an age that has escaped from the chains of youth, but has not yet slid into the iron cage of old age. At such a time of life one should be in a position to benefit from experience, while still enjoying clear mental powers and—hopefully—good health.

Celia enjoyed both.

But she was alone. A strange distaste for any form of close intimacy with persons of either sex, resulted in her never marrying, or as for that matter encouraging anything more than superficial friendships, so that now—while still enjoying her own company—there was a fear-germ—a nagging thought—that she might have missed out on something essential to her well-being.

She swept, brushed, polished, arranged pictures and knick-knacks to her satisfaction, then manhandled heavy furniture from one place to another. But the time came when all that could be done was done and the bright hues of novelty died; then the fear-germ returned, a little larger, stronger than before.

Alien thoughts chased each other down the rarely explored avenues of the brain and eventually congregated into a ridiculous notion:

She should have had children.

Before moving into the cottage she would have laughed such an idea to scorn, for had she not ridiculed the premise that a woman's primary role was that of mother? "In this over-crowded planet," she often maintained, "I at least have not made the situation worse by brat production. Pity there's not a few more like me."

Now, while seated on a well padded chair, she would splutter up from

a shallow sleep, almost certain that she had been awakened by tiny fingers tugging at her skirt or the sound of laughing childish voices coming from the next room. Nonsense of course. The result of a wobbly tummy, plus the excitement of moving into her new home.

Perhaps it would be better to get out more, join a literary appreciation group or something. After all she was now at that time of life when one wanted to be taken out of oneself—whatever that might mean—and it was most important not to pander to—well—fancies. She could remember one or two lukewarm friends who had gone distinctly funny after

entering the fifties.

She joined the Ladies' Tuesday Afternoon Group, where the latest TV program (if it were decent), the prime minister's latest misdemeanor, the prospect of an atomic war and other worthwhile subjects were discussed. As Celia prided herself on being an outspoken person who was not afraid of expressing her opinion, she had soon dethroned the current chairperson and made herself extremely unpopular, which as everyone knows, is the seal of success.

Then she took to attending evening classes, organized by the local county council, where she became proficient in basket-making, early Victorian letter writing, pottery and raising a garden in window boxes.

All this activity kept her as active as anyone could wish—or in many cases would want—and succeeded in taking her out of herself in no uncertain manner. There was no time for morbid fancies and hence no danger of her going distinctly funny.

For a while at any rate.

Basket-making became a boring pastime, early Victorian letter writers revealed themselves to be nothing more than persons with a penchant for not using one word when ten would do; pottery was a messy business. and as she already had an extensive garden, raising one in window boxes was a waste of time. Moreover the Ladies' Tuesday Afternoon Group grew restless under her dictatorship, successfully organized a palace revolution, replaced her as chairperson by the wife of a coal merchant, which in effect meant she was sent into exile.

So it was that once again—as the time honored expression has it—time hung heavily on her hands, and she took to sitting in a comfortable armchair, trying to read a novel, which inevitably slipped from her hands, when she sank into a shallow sleep.

Almost every time she was awakened by tiny fingers tugging at her skirt, or the sound of laughing childish voices coming from the next room. But she could no longer say with hand on heart: "Nonsense of course."

Sometimes the tugging—the childish laughter took place when she was on the verge of awakening. She was in fact almost fully aware that four or five children were involved, possibly two by her knees and three in the next room. On occasion they made quite a clamor and it was this that rocketed her up from the pit of sleep, hurtled her into full awareness—then all sound and tugging stopped.

The phenomenon had an eerie effect, became more than a little disturbing and Celia again began to wonder if she was indeed becoming distinctly funny and if the house, after all, was going to suit her.

Then she began to see. Only a glimpse at first.

After a particularly noisy session, shrill laughter, stamping of feet, the slamming of a door, plus violent tugging, Celia cried out, opened her eyes, then fell back in her chair.

She had a glimpse of a tiny figure attired in a white dress disappearing round a door frame. A fleeting vision that might have been a vestige of a dream, or maybe an illusion created by the wakening brain (always supposing that organ ever sleeps), there were all manner of explanations, but when this last occurrence was matched up with the sounds, one's wondering invaded a new plane of conjecture.

A few days later she was permitted more than a glimpse. A good long look.

Sleeping again, but this time her her bed, with a bedside lamp sending a golden circle of light across the room, for the eerie, distinctly funny disturbances made total and even partial darkness unpleasant, to say the least. Lying on her left side, cheek nestled deeply in a plump pillow, her eyes sprang open, and she saw a child, a little girl, standing a few feet away, looking at her, attired in a white dress, with auburn hair groomed into tight ringlets, hanging down to her shoulders. Dark, limpid eyes gazed into her own and for a while it seemed as if time was frozen and Celia Watson would spend eternity staring at a child, while cold fear crept slowly up from her feet, like the soul-releasing chill that announces the approach of death.

Perhaps that good long look lasted two minutes—or five seconds—but it seemed as if time had stood still before the child vanished—ceased to be—became as never was.

But its image remained imprinted on Celia's brain, persisted in lurking behind her eyes, and when she closed the lids, there it was standing against a blazing red background.

Fearful to look upon, dreadful to consider—but—appealing.

When fear had unlocked its shackles, Celia leapt out of bed, ran out on to the landing and raced into the bathroom, this being a sure place

of refuge back in the innocent days of childhood, it being assumed that no one would dare invade its privacy once the engaged bolt had been slid into position. So far as she could remember experience had never disproved this theory.

Seated on the lavatory pan she gave the matter her full attention and came to the conclusion that she might have over-reacted to the situation, fearsome though the experience had been. Had not her late, extremely wise Papa always maintained: "There is always a rational explanation for every extraordinary experience if only we take the trouble to look for it."

Therefore it stood to reason there was a rational explanation for all these sounds and visions, be they ghosts . . .

Celia shuttered on the lavatory seat and regurgitated that horrible little word:

"Ghosts!"

Her old new house was haunted!

She had never thought about ghosts before, save on the occasion when she read *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, and that did rather offer a rational explanation. The governess might have been distinctly funny. Had anyone asked her: "Do you believe in ghosts?" the answer undoubtedly would have been a head shaking "don't know," which might have been a cover up for: "Maybe I do."

Now, sitting on the lavatory pan, she most certainly did.

She must leave the newly acquired house at the very break of day and never come back. Get the nice estate agent to put it on the market, then buy a well appointed flat nearer town. That was what she must do.

Most certainly.

She shifted her behind into a more comfortable position and gave the matter some more thought.

"Why?"

Why give up this lovely new-old house, just because of some noisy ghost children?

After all, they only seemed to manifest when she was on the point of waking up and that surely could be borne. Repetition was already veneering the phenomenon with the gloss of familiarity, which in due course might well breed a kind of contempt.

Children? She should have had children if only their production had not necessitated a rather revolting physical function. Now she might acquire some without any effort on anyone's part: children that did not require feeding, clothing, cosseting, washing or any other beastly service.

Dream children. Ghostly waifs.

Celia rose from the lavatory pan, automatically pulled the chain, then bravely walked out of the bathroom. She crossed the landing and stood (for no particular reason) looking down over the banisters. She cleared her throat three times, before calling out in a sing-song voice:

"Come on . . . children. Come to Mummy. Come to Mummy."

This language had always worked with a kitten she had once owned, but the ghost children seemed to be unimpressed. Not a sight or sound greeted eye or ear and presently Celia went back to bed, there surprisingly to fall into a deep sleep and not awake until the morning sun had turned the window into a golden square.

"Ghost children," Miss Broadfield-Blythe said gently, tapping Celia's knee with a pointed finger, "are the most harmless of wraiths. You see, my dear, they are seeking love."

Celia refilled her guest's cup and replaced a blue woollen cozy on the teapot.

"Is that so?"

"Indeed it is. No doubt during their brief lives they never experienced that precious emotion and are now spending eternity looking for it."

"I've only seen one child," Celia pointed out, "although I've heard others. I think there's four or five."

Miss Broadfield-Blythe closed and opened her watery blue eyes, then rubbed her long nose.

"Bound to be more than one, but not more than six I'd say. Never in my long experience have I known there to be more than six ghost-children in one group. When I received your most interesting letter, I said to Mildred—we've worked on many a case together—I said, Mildred, a mass juvenile haunting, but not more than six, I'll be bound. Tell me, Miss Watson... It is Miss?"

Celia nodded.

"How sensible. Tell me, Miss Watson, how did you come to contact me? Did someone recommend me?"

"No, I saw your advertisement in the tobacconist's window. As I've made no progress myself, I thought an expert might be more successful."

Miss Broadfield-Blythe screwed up her face into an expression that might have denoted puzzlement and asked:

"Progress? Success? I'm not with you, dear. What kind of progress had you in mind?"

"Well, to bring the children out of hiding. I mean—I only hear or see them just before I wake up. Properly wake up, that is. I want to—well make contact. See and hear them when wide-awake." "For what reason, dear? Not to experiment I hope. Our spirit friends are not at all happy when experimented with."

Celia fluttered her hands. "No, indeed. I want . . . want . . . to sort of

adopt them."

A wonderful smile spread slowly over Miss Broadfield-Blythe's face and for a while lent it a kind of beauty. "That's simply gorgeous, dear. Simply heart-stopping." She pulled forth an enormous handkerchief from a patch pocket. "Want to adopt poor, love-seeking spirit children! God bless you, my dear." She patted her eyes several times, then resolutely put the handkerchief away. "But let's get down to our muttons. What can I do to help you?"

Celia put on her little-I'm-lost-girl act, which had never been known to fail when dealing with masculine inclined middle-aged spinsters. "I rather hoped you'd be able to do something that will bring them out. Let

me see and talk to them."

The lady medium looked thoughtful. "I will do my best, dear. Can't do more. No one can. I'll see what can be done with the atmosphere. Sort of taste it."

She pushed her tea cup to one side, laid her hands palms uppermost on the table, then closed her eyes. Presently she giggled. "One of them is tickling me. Right in the center of the right hand. How charming." She called out in the same sing-song voice that Celia had used a few days before:

"Come to me, children dears. Come to your Auntie Ag, who you need not fear. Put your tweeny hands in mine and we'll say hullo to your Mummy-to-be. Won't that be nice? Yes, it will. Yes, it will."

A loud crash came from above the stairs, which sounded as if the cut glass perfume container that resided on Celia's dressing table, had been knocked—or thrown—on to the floor. But that was all.

Miss Broadfield-Blythe intoned other inducements, but for all the response they received, she might as well have saved her breath. Presently she released a gentle sigh and said:

"Well, I'm sure I've stirred them up. Brought them to the surface, so to speak. You'll probably get results after I'm gone. Nothing startling at first. It takes time for this kind of thing to get really under way. But so far as I'm concerned there doesn't seem to be much more I can do. Not for today at any rate."

"I can't thank you enough," Celia replied. "If nothing else, you've put the entire business on a commonplace plane, which is truly remarkable. At least I won't be frightened now, no matter what I see or hear."

"Frightened! Why on earth should you be frightened? Those who have

passed over, have no wish to frighten us. No wish at all. Just one little point, dear. My fee is ten pounds."

For several days after Miss Broadfield-Blythe's visit, Celia saw and heard nothing, which was both a relief and a disappointment. A relief because she had by no means lost that inner dread which afflicts everyone who comes face to face with the unusual; disappointment, because she wanted to play the game of adopting dream children. One of those fantasies which it would be well if it never came to fulfillment.

Then one Sunday morning when the time erupting sound of church bells was disturbing the dust of long dead memories, a ripple of childish laughter came from the landing, followed by the thud of footsteps running down the stairs. Celia, who was about to open the front door, spun round, but there was nothing untoward to see. Nothing at all.

So she went out into the porch, double locked the front door behind her, then went to church—a weekly social event she always enjoyed.

The old church with its stained-glass windows and lingering aroma that was comprised of burnt candles, prayer books and damp, made her for some reason think of crumbling tombs and deep underground vaults, where the noble dead have slept for centuries. Then the sunlight was filtered through the stained-glass and did something wonderful to a young girl's hair, even while it revealed the gaunt face of an old man, and caused a shadow mask to form round his deep sunken eyes.

Choirboys' high-pitched treble voices sent a melody of sound up to the ancient rafters, before crashing open doors in Celia Watson's brain, and an impression of long-long ago childhoods came drifting out on multicolored clouds, even as dust-motes drifted along light beams formed by sunlight and stained-glass.

The brain was quite unable to deal with this experience and closed down its awareness, so that Celia's next impression was that of shaking hands with the vicar who had hastened to the front porch for that purpose. She walked home in a not unpleasant bemused state, even though she knew—positively knew—something exciting was about to happen.

When she opened her front door, she could not be certain if three or four small shapes raced up the stairs and disappeared on the landing, but the brain suggested in an abstract sort of way that such may have been the case. She removed her hat and coat, went into the kitchen, there opened the gas oven door and inspected the fillet end of a leg of lamb, which had been sizzling gently on a low heat for two hours. Almost ready. The roast potatoes had also acquired a rich crisp brownness, and it only

remained for her to ignite the gas ring under a saucepan of garden peas, for Sunday lunch to be well on its way toward full preparation. She had long ago dispensed with apple pie and custard, which had been a permanent feature of childhood Sunday dinner, but those were the days when plumpness was considered to be a sign of good health.

She turned, reached out for a towel on which to wipe her hands—and

saw them.

The little girl—the one she had seen before—and a slightly older boy dressed in a blue velvet suit—were standing in the kitchen doorway,

watching her.

First the dread-chill which ran up from her feet and threatened to paralyze her heart; then the wonderment—the suggestion of joy—and the realization she was viewing two ghosts (hateful word) in full daylight, while wide-awake and at close quarters. And it was no use trying to quell the racing heart and rub sweaty hands on the skirt of her dress, for the blend of emotions was sending some kind of current down through her nerve grid and she was laughing and crying, both at the same time, and the two children continued to watch her, the hint of a smile on their angel faces.

With one hand she wiped tears from her streaming eyes and stretched out the other toward the two apparitions, half-hoping, half-dreading to make some kind of contact, but they continued to stare at her, the smile more pronounced, verging on derision. Then they started to drift away from her, back through the doorway, across the hall until the two shapes were nothing more than splodges of colored light on the far wall—the product of sunshine and glass.

Celia called out: "Come back... come back," and as though in derisive

reply, the sound of childish laughter came from above stairs.

She slept hardly at all that night, the habit of trying to look in every direction at once, which she had acquired during the daylight hours, became even more pronounced once the sun had set. To lie in bed with the lights full on, jerking the head from side to side, straining the ears to catch every sound, became nerve-racking to say the least, particularly when fear became stronger than the desire to acquire ghost-dream-children. To Celia it seemed nothing short of ridiculous that she should dread and desire. It was a state of being that surpassed being distinctly funny and verged on insanity.

Not until the sun sent its first infant shafts of light through the window curtains, did she relax on her sweat-moist pillows and slip into an uneasy sleep. When she awoke much later in the morning, she was in time to

see a small arm and shoulder disappear round the half open door and experienced the by now familiar feeling of pleasure blended with fear.

No further phenomenon manifested for the next few weeks, and such was Celia's anxiety, she often forgot to eat, wash or change her clothes. In consequence people—particularly those who did not like her—began making half-pitying, half-scornful remarks and generally conjecture why this lapse from pride-in-appearance had taken place. The vicar decided it was his duty to investigate.

"The place is in an awful mess," Celia objected.

The vicar, a tall handsome man with thick white hair, gave her a most charming smile and said: "But I've come to see you, dear lady, not your house. Please, I have walked a long way this morning and really would

appreciate a cup of coffee."

This request—some might call it a command—for hospitality from a man of the cloth, could not be ignored, so Celia could do no less than stand to one side and allow the reverend gentleman to enter. He gave the living room a quick glance and had to agree the place was indeed in an awful mess, for apart from an accumulation of dust, screwed up balls of writing paper lay on the floor, table, chairs and mantelpiece; one half sheet which seemed to have unrolled itself, caught his eye and he managed to decipher the words scrawled with a black ball point pen: "COME TO ME CHI"

But if the room was in an awful mess, the woman could be aptly described as a wreck of her former self. Gray hair—strangely he could not remember seeing a single gray hair on her head before today—hung in rat-tails round and over a white-lined face; heavy blue pouches drooped under watery eyes, which seemed to be in danger of running down sunken cheeks. A slight but persistent tic quivered at the right of her mouth, while there was a distinct tremor of the right hand.

This she raised and waved in the direction of a deep armchair. "Seat

yourself, vicar, and I'll fetch you a cup of coffee."

The clergyman shook his head. "No, allow me to get you one. The kitchen is through there—" he in turn pointed to an open doorway—"as I remember. I used to visit this house in the days of Mrs. Fortescue."

"Really, I could not possibly allow you to . . . "

"Nonsense. You are clearly unwell and I'm quite capable of waiting on

myself and you. Now you seat yourself. I'll find everything."

Celia did as she was bid, but watched the vicar disappear into the kitchen with great concern, and once called out: "It's in an awful mess. . The coffee jar is on the shelf over the sink and there should be milk in the fridge . . ."

He returned after a lapse of ten minutes, carrying two mugs of

steaming coffee and wearing an expression of deep anxiety.

"I found the coffee, but the milk in your refrigerator seems to have gone off, but fortunately I managed to unearth a tin of condensed. In fact your supply of fresh food seems to be-well-rather in the same state as the milk. Due no doubt to the sultry weather. But I do think someone should do something about clearing out—the debris—and restocking. I do really. But first drink this coffee. I did find some biscuits. but they were distinctly soggy."

"I'm so sorry, but I've been very busy lately, I've rather let things

go . . ."

The vicar seated himself on the edge of the chair, and took a tentative sip from his mug of coffee. "Please, no apologies are necessary. My job is to help and understand. Miss Watson—Celia—you are without doubt sorely troubled. Trouble shared is trouble halved. Please allow me to halve your trouble, then possibly discard the remainder."

This rather puzzling offer was accompanied by such a charming smile, Celia for the first time in a long while dared to hope that a male might have the necessary acumen to give sound advice and even understand

what must be an unique situation. But still she hesitated.

"I'm not sure, Mr. . . . "

"Rodney, Celia. Please."

"Yes, well, yes, Mr. . . . Rodney. I mean I'm not sure if you'll fully understand my problem. You see . . . "

"Yes, Celia?"

"The fact is this house is . . . well . . . "

"Rather lonely for one person?"

"No, far from it. No . . . it is haunted by the ghosts of at least five children."

The Reverend Rodney emptied his coffee cup and placed it gently on a nearby low table, then took one of Celia's hands in his.

"Dear Celia, let us take one point at a time. Firstly we know that ghosts—as such—do not exist. When the body dies the soul goes straight to Heaven, or-sadly-straight to the place of atonement. There can be no lingering."

Normally Celia would have accepted this dogma from a man of the cloth as literal truth, but now, having some first-hand evidence of ghosts,

she was inclined to question the reverend gentleman's logic.

"But Mr. . . . Rodney, cannot some souls, such as children's souls, be not quite ready for such an extreme—grand place as Heaven—the other place being out of the question-and prefer to-well-stay where they were in life. Right here. It makes sense to me."

"What makes sense to us, Celia, need not make sense to the Almiehts." This is the plane of sin and flesh. I need hardly point out how the two go together. Above is the world of light. Below the world of darkness. There are no age groups in elemity."

Celia took a deep breath and released a flow of words that revealed the truth as she saw it

"But I have seen and heard the ghosts -- disembooked souls of children. Here in this house—this room. First as dream figures—then as clearly as I see and hear you. And they need love. And I have so much to give. having sort of saved it up over the years. Please don't be and tell me they don't exist."

The Reverend Rodney assumed a very grave expression and clearly thought deeply before answering. Then he cleared his throat and after regaining possession of Celia's right hand (which she displayed signs of wanting to withdraw), said in his deep attractive voice:

"Dear Celia, I am not going to dismiss what you have told me as the result of a fevered, even neurotic, imagination, brought about by loneliness and frustration-for I have heard stories about this house, which up to this time I never credited as being other than complete moorahine. But now . . . "

He paused for a while, then went on, "So far as I can gather this house—a long while ago—was inhabited by a couple called Ferguson— Jacob and Sarah Ferguson. And they did have five children-four bows and a girl. That must be admitted. There were five children. All ranging from five to thirteen years. The parents practiced what they and some of their contemporaries called the old religion. In other words the black arts, devil worship-witchcraft. The children were corrupted from birth and in time-for young minds are malleable-became even more evil than their parents. No one knows how the end came about, but it is assumed that the children killed their mother, then the father massacred them, before committing suicide himself. But there is one school of opinion that maintains it was the other way around. The children solled both parents, then themselves by some secret ritual, which ensured their souls would be withheld from torment and confined to the walls of this house. This I must disbelieve, but in view of your experience I am inclined to believe some personality residue, or manifestation of past evil, still lingers here. There can be no doubt you must leave this house at once. Leave it and never come back. It seems possible you have the kind of

aind that can pick up impressions, time debris . . . I don't know. But you

gust leave this house."

Celia gazed upon the vicar with mounting anger, all her mistrust of the opposite sex revived. When he had finished speaking and given her land a final squeeze, she remained silent for some little while, before

aying in a carefully controlled voice:

"First of all, vicar, I do not believe a single word of that horrid story. I there is a basic truth in it, then the wicked parents left the poor little hings to die of ill-treatment, and now their innocent souls are demanding—demanding, do you hear?—the love and protection that was never theirs in life. I intend to remain here and provide that love and protection."

"Celia . . ."

"My name is Miss Watson."

"Celia, you are dreadfully mistaken. This house is bad for you. Believe me. I am convinced that is the truth. A hundred other people might be able to live here undisturbed. But not you. Come to the vicarage until .

"I would be obliged if you would leave now."

"You must allow me to convince you . . ."

"I do not wish to be rude. Please leave now. And do not come back." He conjured up a very wry smile. "I do hope I'm wrong and sincerely apologize if I have needlessly upset you. I should not have told you that ridiculous story, but if you can see and hear . . ."

"Shut the door behind you as you go out."

"I hate . . . simply hate . . ."

"Pull the door sharply to or the Yale lock will not engage. I believe the

wood is warped."

The slam of the front door was a prelude to an unnatural silence and the ensuing loneliness (a state she had never known before) possibly the reason for the sudden fit of crying. Her shoulders shook, tears poured down her cheeks, and it seemed as if the grief of a lifetime had suddenly found an outlet and was now smashing down all the carefully erected barricades of indifference.

But the fit passed, she wiped her eyes, gulped back one last sob and

went into the sitting-room.

All five ghost children were waiting for her. The tallest one-blond hair, bright eyes, dressed in a green suit-standing by the window: the next-not so tall, auburn hair, dark eyes, in a long brown coat-to the left of the doorway. The little boy and girl she had seen before—to the left of the doorway: and another boy, of medium height, dressed in black, a long robe affair, his black eyes glittering in a rather alarming fashing if one looked at them too long. His black hair hung down to his shoulden

Not one moved. Not so much as a blink or the merest movement of finger. Motionless effigies. Three dimension shadows of what had been Images recreated from personality debris by her brain and projected by her eyes. Maybe the vicar had instructively pinpointed the truth of matter, but she could not believe these five shades had anything eval their make-up. That must be impossible.

Now to give them life and make them her own

She called softly: "Come, children. There's nothing to feat in this house now. I will be a mother to you all. Take from me the essence you need to live again. To be always with me, awake or allow. So I can hear your voices, your footsteps—if possible feel your hands to achine me.

The little boy and girl (they might have been twins) were the first to move. They glided to her and came to rest some two feet away, head tilted, eyes looking up into hers. But she could not detect a glimmer of intelligence. Merely the glitter that might be reflected in the eyes of some animal. Then the tallest came to her and stood behind the exernative specific they were) and looked into her eyes for so it seemed). Then came the lad in brown who took up a position to her right. finally the one in black—all save the dead white face.

Now what to do with them?

She turned and after saying: Follow me, children, led the way into the kitchen. At least such was her intention, but when she wakes back they had not moved. All stood in the same positions, stating at the spot she had just vacated, motionless again, and the seeded

"Silly me. They will not be hungry. Food and kitchens mean nothing

to them. It is love they need."

She went back to them and bending down whispered the wonderful message. "Children, I want you to know you are mine - I am yours from now on. Do you understand? We now belong to each other. Your loneliness is over. So is mine."

The boy in black moved slightly. His eyes gleamed like sparks floating in the dark.

"Can no one-not a single one of you, give me some sign that you understand?" Celia pleaded. "Don't let that awful clergyman be right. Please."

They all vanished. Were switched off, Were no more. Celia spent the rest of the day looking for them.

The bed had come with the house and was very wide. Celia had always

slept in a three foot bed, never having had occasion to require anything larger. This might have been the reason she slept on the left side of this giant and never parted upper from lower sheet on the right. Despite—or maybe because of—the experience of that day, she slept soundly all night; sank into a deep coma of unawareness that drugged every sense, save for the one which has never been explained.

Then she awoke and lay quite still, knowing the unexpected had happened, but unwilling at that moment to open her eyes and discover

what shape it had taken.

The senses returned to seventy-five percent normality, the brain expelled the fog of sleep, but still Celia kept her eyes tight closed, conjecture creating mental pictures that were without understanding.

Then hearing recorded a sound. Low childish laughter. Not far off, but

near—in this room—by—or on—her bed.

The demand to know would not be denied. Celia opened her eyes.

The window curtains were drawn apart and the room was flooded with silver moonlight and revealed their slender forms in every detail. All five children were seated on her bed. The two small ones, the twins, on the spare pillows, the tall boy and he in brown way down at the foot and he in black lying on his stomach, his head turned in her direction, the black eyes now glittering with an alien intelligence.

Joy came shuffling on reluctant feet, for had they not come to her, sought her out of their own accord, and surely it was not their fault they had so white faces, or that the lad in black should have rather frightening

eyes.

They had that death-beauty that rightfully belongs to some vivid nightmare that has long been forgotten by the active mind, but still can be recalled by the subconscious at that moment which separated sleep from awakening. Celia thought briefly of sleeping castles where mist formed strange shapes in ruined corridors.

She tried to sit up, but for some reason her body refused to obey the dictates of her brain, although she was permitted to turn her head from side to side, but that was hardly an asset, for some of the joy seeped away

every time she met the glittering-eyed gaze of the lad in black.

Then a giggle came from one or maybe all of them; a deep-throated inane giggle that had the suggestion of a squeal, and undiluted fear slid into her mind and she became as one who has encouraged the presence of half-grown tigers. Instinct warned body and mind and she succeeded in sitting up, but as freedom of movement returned to her, so, it would seem, it did to them. They all drifted off the bed and blanket and sheets went with them. Then the squealing inane giggle blending with the

tearing of her nightdress, and they moved, danced, round the bed, while she called out in fear-joy ecstasy:

"No, children, you must not be so naughty. Please . . . please you'll

hurt Mummy."

The giggling became louder, the five moved faster until they became a whirling mass of colored mist; a scratch appeared on Celia's right shoulder and seeped a thin trail of blood down her back. Her hair stood on end and she screamed when it was tugged abruptly. Invisible fingers poked at her naked flesh, pinched and punched, while a roaring darkness threatened to engulf her. Then all movement ceased and she was left trembling on the bed, as the dreadful five congregated in the doorway. All had dead white faces now and every one giggled, ejected the inane squealing sound from between lax lips.

Celia raised herself up on to her elbows and managed to speak reproachfully with a sob-racked voice.

"You naughty-naughty children. You've hurt and frightened Mummy who only wanted to love you."

The giggling took on a higher-pitched tone and the five turned and fled over the landing and running footsteps could be hard descending the stairs.

Then for a while silence—and loneliness.

For two days Celia dismissed the minor destruction as nothing more than infantile mischief with no sinister intent. All glass jars and bottles were smashed, the refrigerator door refused to stay shut, then ceased to function. "They don't understand," she told the empty house. "If they had been reared in a loving atmosphere, they wouldn't be like this. Never mind, patience and endurance will work the miracle. It must."

But on the morning of the third day, when she distinctly saw the lad in black dart from under her right elbow and deliberately upset the frying pan in which she was cooking some sausages, thus causing a roaring flame to soar up toward the ceiling and all but set her hair alight, then she very reluctantly accepted that the children were not just mischievous, but had at least some evil propensities.

But it made not the slightest difference.

Beauty can hide any number of imperfections and love can explain away any number of crimes. In an odd sort of way it was rather exciting having to keep one's wits alert as to what trap they had set overnight. The footstool placed at the very top of the stairs, the bare patch on electric wiring, the turned on gas taps that just needed a lighted match to send her hurtling into eternity. Probably join them in that dimension they

inhabited. So far as was possible she experienced surprise at their ingenuity which resulted in the topmost cellar step being transformed into a death hazard by means of spirit of salts (transported from the loo) poured on the wooden supports. Had not her nose transmitted a warning, the undermined tread would have collapsed under her right foot.

"Artful monkeys," she murmured, after successfully smothering the blast of terror that threatened to destroy beyond repair the bastion of

sanity. "I wonder what they'll think of next?"

If they were capable of thought, there was little for them to think of, for from then on Celia rarely left a chair she had dragged into the hall, this being the place "her family" were most likely to materialize. She smiled indulgently when the twins removed her shoes and flung them across the room and laughed softly when the Reverend Rodney climbed in through the sitting-room window, then somehow finished up on the topmost cellar step. After the initial scream, he never bothered her again.

"I should have had children," she announced again and again. "I should have considered the possibility of having children, long ago. They

are such a comfort."

In fact they gave her more than comfort. More likely satisfaction, fulfillment, a most gratifying understanding that she had not lived her solitary life in vain. For the children grew fatter, particularly the lad in black who became positively bloated. They never acquired the slightest hint of color, for all their faces retained that rather disconcerting deadwhite complexion, but Celia was certain it was a healthy pallor.

For herself—well—occasionally, she became aware of her own alarming thinness, the fact that her hands were well nigh transparent and she lacked the strength to do more than stir in her chair. But presently she took little interest in such mundane matters, for the antics of her family demanded all of her time. How they ran up and down stairs, in and out of those rooms she could see from her position in the hall, chasing each other, stopping now and again to plant a burning kiss on bare flesh, a reward out of all proportion to any slight discomfort she might suffer.

And they squealed with joyful excitement. Yes, really squealed with unrestrained joy. And Celia expressed her joy with some such sound, for

had she not at last managed to create a happy family?

They came in through the sitting-room window, the one the Reverend Rodney had inadvertently left open. Tall burly men in blue uniforms, followed by a more slender one in a neat gray suit.

He was the only one to be actually sick. One of the others exclaimed: "Oh, my God!" but generally speaking they were all fairly immune

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against being upset by the extremely unpleasant. Two made their way to the cellar steps, only to return a few minutes later, when the one with three white chevrons on his right arm, stated briefly:

"The missing parson isn't missing any more. At the bottom of the steps,

what's left of him. Oh, my Gawd! Look at them!"

Shouts that expressed horror, disgust and downright loathing, followed five bloated rats as they raced up the stairs.

### Acknowledgments

### THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES: XIII

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